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"Empty Millenial Frenzy": American Fiction and Economic Prosperity of the 1990s

by

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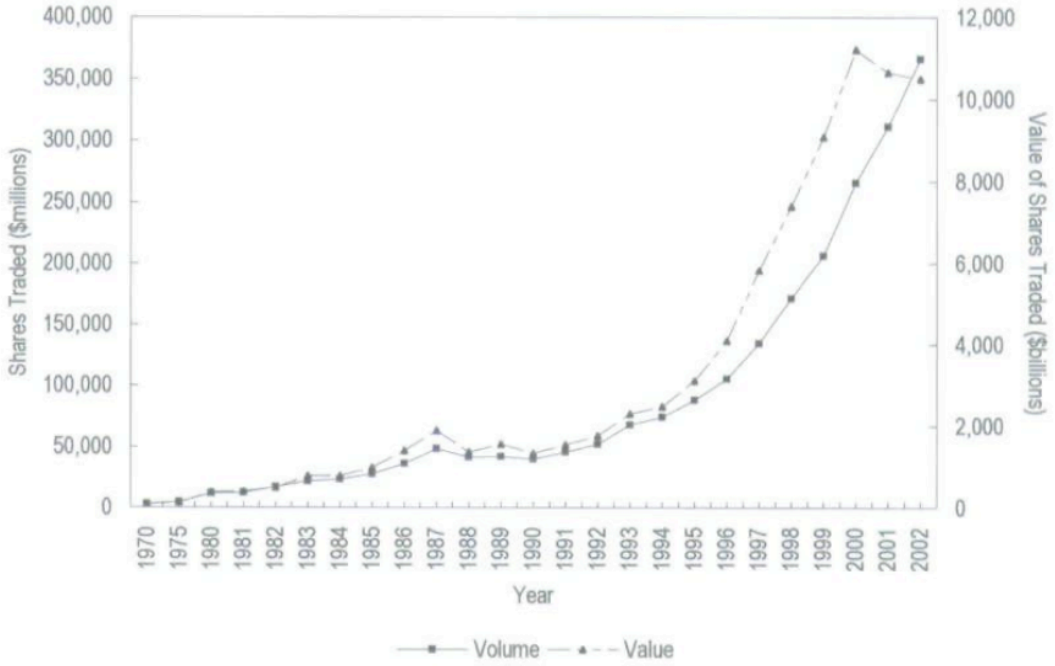
Last, thanks to my friends who sent me articles and data or edited chapters. I'm indebted. I'd name you, but I'd prefer that my thesis not resemble my Facebook wall.

FIGURE 4

NYSE Historical Stock Volume and Value



Source: Vicki Bogan, "Stock Market Participation and the Internet," *Journal of Financial and Quantitative Analysis* 43, no. 1 (2008): 195 fig. 4, dyson.cornell.edu/faculty_sites/bogan/doc/research/31244854.pdf.

Introduction

From 1990 to 2000, the NASDAQ Composite, a group of three thousand technology stocks, rose by 795 percent.[1] This market run up meant that a toiling scientist could turn his research lab into a publicly-trade company and become a CEO, a software start-up could trump industrial giants, and an upper-middle-class family could invest in a mutual fund that owned the stocks of both and watch its portfolio mature in millions. Meanwhile, investment banks took fees from all of these market participants. The finance industry thus made huge profits for itself and allowed a privileged portion of the country to join in the spirit of the boom.

The NASDAQ, the stock exchange at the center of 1990s financial prosperity, points towards a more general trend observable in the political economy of the United States since at least the early 1970s: free market capitalism's transformation of the post-war middle-class society. Income inequality grew steadily since 1970 and reached nearly Gilded Age levels in 1998.[2] Economic productivity, an engine of middle-class growth, had not improved since 1972 except inside the computer industry.[3]

Building on two decades of economic upheaval, the financial prosperity of the 1990s further transformed American society. Towards the end of the millenium, America experienced the culmination of a profound reshuffling of its political culture

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[1] Google; "Google Finance: quotes and news," http://www.google.com/finance?q=ixic.
[2] Thomas Piketty and Emmanuel Saez, "Income Inequality in the United States, 1913-1998," *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* cxviii, no. 1 (2003): 31-32, elsa.berkeley.edu/~saez/pikettyqje.pdf.
[3] Robert J. Gordon, "Has the 'New Economy' Rendered the Productivity Slowdown Obsolete?" (presented to the CBO Council of Economic Advisors, June, 4, 1999): 1, elsa.berkeley.edu/~saez/pikettyqje.pdf.

that had begun in the 1970s with the crumbling of the post-war liberal order and the rise of the New Right. In The Paradox of American Democracy, John Judis describes how, in the 1950s and 1960s, a détente was arranged among corporate America, labor unions, and government. As Judis explains, these interests established a balance in a broker state arrangement. Meanwhile, a network of (overwhelmingly WASP) elites in areas ranging from the military to finance played a "mediating role" and united behind "a single idea of the national interest."[4] But with free market fundamentalism that reshaped public discourse during the Reagan Revolution, popular support for government intervention into the economy had eroded and continued to do so during the NASDAQ boom. "In a manner largely unprecedented in the twentieth century," Thomas Frank writes in One Market Under God, "leaders of American opinion were basically in agreement on the role of business in American life."[5] The novelist's terrain had shifted from, in Jonathan Franzen's terms, the "political quietism" and "uneasy conformity" of the 1950s, to one that David Foster Wallace labeled the "cybernetically post-postmodern" 1990s.[6]

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[4] John Judis, *The Paradox of American Democracy: Elites, Special Interests, and the Betrayal of Public Trust* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2000); Judis could easily be accused of overlooking underprivileged groups and being naïve about corporate power. But even leftist accounts of the post-war period that are more suspicious of the middle class society generally agree with the broad outlines of his argument. For example, David Harvey differs with Judis in that he thinks this order, which he terms "Fordism," ultimately served the interests of monopoly capitalism. Nonetheless, he writes of "the tense but nevertheless firm balance of power that prevailed between organized labor, large corporate capital, and the nation state," and he then, taking 1973 as his starting point, explores its crumbling. See: David Harvey, *The Conditions of Postmodernity: an Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2004), 132-33, http://books.google.com/books?id=RAGeva8_ElMC&printsec=frontcover&dq=david+harvey&hl=en&ei=9PWfTf3SDsXUgQfPJXaBQ&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=4&ved=0CDkQ6AEwAw#v=onepage&q&f=false.

[5] Thomas Frank, *One Market Under God: Extreme Capitalism, Market Populism, and the End of Economic Democracy* (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 16.

[6] Jonathan Franzen, introduction to *The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit* first Four Wall Eight Windows edition, by Sloan Wilson (New York: Four Wall Eight Windows, 1955),

This thesis examines the works of four major American writers who tried to come to grips with free market capitalism's undoing of their society: Bret Easton Ellis's American Psycho (1991), David Foster Wallace's Infinite Jest (1996), Jonathan Franzen's The Corrections (2001), and Don DeLillo's Cosmopolis (2003).[7] The novels capture and digest late twentieth century prosperity and its surrounding feverish culture. The fruitful variety of perspectives across the novels stems from the range of their main characters, which includes a hedge-fund manager driving Wall Street (Cosmopolis), a humanities academic railing against techno-corporatism (The Corrections), and a recovering addict working as a janitor on minimum wage (Infinite Jest). Despite these and other creative and intellectual differences, a tone of anxiety and disparagement—and not one of postmodern acquiescence—towards the economic developments of the era unites the works. That tone derives from a shared foundational belief: that profit-making threatens culture, including art, community, and ethical tradition. These writers thus draw from a modernist opposition between

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4; all subsequent editions refer to this citation; David Foster Wallace, "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction," *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 13, no. 2 (1993): 151, jsomers.net/DFW_TV.pdf.

[7] DeLillo (born in 1936) is the only writer to have lived through the immediate post-war period. His *magnum opus*, Underworld (1998), is split between contemporary Arizona and a gritty but nonetheless gloriously authentic World War II era Bronx. For Franzen (1959), Wallace (1962), and Ellis (1964), the 1950s could serve as a romanticized past in which their talents would have been deeply appreciated by a broad audience. It is intriguing yet somewhat unsurprising that these three novelists try to connect their own experiences with those of the post-war generation. In 2002, Franzen wrote an introduction to Sloan Wilson's 1950s classic The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit that drips with nostalgia for the decade he only saw as an infant ("If you're looking for a fifties fix…"). In an interview in 2003, Wallace describes his own Midwestern childhood in similarly nostalgic terms: "Now I'm going to sound like a grandpa, but when I went to school, I had to take a class called citizenship," and added that it was the norm in his community to pay close attention to politics. And Ellis's American Psycho posits that 1988 and 1968 represent entirely different cultural moments and memorializes the reign of the Beatles and The Rolling Stones. See: Don DeLillo, *Underworld* (New York: Scribner, 1997); Jonathan Franzen, introduction to *The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit*; David Foster Wallace, "Interview," *ZDF Meditathek*, 2003, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N5IDAnB_rns; Bret Eason Ellis, *American Psycho* (New York: Vintage Books, Random House Inc., 1991).

the realms of culture and commerce that had fallen out of favor in a decade defined by "market-thinking."[8]

With the authors' investments in this opposition in mind, this thesis emphasizes two broad trends in American history that reflect the impact of free market capitalism on the prestige and cultural authority of the literary novelist. First, in the broader market for art and entertainment, the novelist's status plummeted because of the proliferation of competing media. The 1990s marked a critical moment in what Franzen disparages as "electronic democracy," in which cable and satellite TV and the internet became dominant forms of entertainment and communication.[9] This story is familiar to all of us, but it was painful to the literary novelist at the end of the twentieth century who imagined that he could speak to a broad swath of the nation. Taking advantage of new technologies, content providers in the 1990s were able to divide up the entertainment marketplace and cater to niches instead of the general public (e.g. The Golf Channel). According to publishing scholar Evan Brier, the literary novel "survive[d] only alongside an infinite number of cultural niche products" in a phenomenon termed the "shrinking mass."[10]

As if television's and the internet's diverse enticements were not enough to distract the public from serious literature, the publishing industry multiplied its offerings as well. The growth of the chain retailers, Borders, Barnes and Noble, and

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[8] Christopher Newfield, *Unmaking the Public University: The Forty-Year Assault on the Middle Class* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2009), 71.
[9] Jonathan Franzen, "Perchance to Dream," *Harper's*, April 1996, 2, WilsonWeb.
2; Evan Brier reuses this phrase as shorthand for how the free market unleashed a new array of entertainment options in the final decades of the twentieth century. See: Evan Brier, *A Novel Marketplace: Mass Culture, the Book Trade, and Post-war American Fiction* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), 162.
[10] Brier, *A Novel Marketplace*, 160-61.

later Amazon, led to a surge in overall book sales, but this growth was the result of market expansion and diversification apart from serious fiction. Entire new genres such as self-help and young adult fiction arose. Since its founding in 1994, a fourth of Amazon's book sales have come from outside its top *one-hundred thousand* titles.[11] A change in the industry's language makes the same point: while the authors studied in this thesis probably sought out the cultural authority once possessed by prominent novelists, publishers and booksellers of the 1990s sequestered them into a newly defined genre, "literary fiction." This taxonomy was necessary because so many new types of books besides serious novels sold well, crowding out the traditional novel. Even within the new corner called "literary fiction," ethnic literature geared towards specific groups made it increasingly difficult for novelists to reach a substantial portion of the readership.

Second, the novelist's society seemed less supportive of creative expression. The post-war liberal order of the 1950s and 1960s tempered capitalism, and in keeping with the ideology of civic elites looking out for the nation's best interest, it also supported cultural education. The Federal government funded state universities and institutions such as the National Endowment for the Arts (1965), the National Endowment for the Humanities (1965), and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (1967) that enhanced the conditions for literary appreciation. When the order collapsed, so too did the government's support for the arts and humanities and the popularity of the ideals of public education and cultural uplift.[12]

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[11] Ibid., 161.

[12] President Clinton courted the art world and promised to support the NEA, but he ultimately did not defend provocative NEA-sponsored artists against the vociferous attacks of the Religious right. Government support for art in the 1980s and 1990s, it seems, was mired by the culture wars and no

Electronic democracy and the collapse of the post-war order worked in tandem to place literary novelists in difficult creative situations. The writers considered in this thesis seem to share an implicit project: diagnosing the wide-ranging ills that accompanied the economic boom of the late twentieth century and restoring skepticism about business's dominance. But this project was nearly insignificant to the broader culture they wished to engage. Franzen lamented the "incompatibility of the slow work of reading and the hyperkinesis of modern life."[13] DeLillo referred to "a period of empty millennial frenzy," that, in retrospect, revealed the "precious integrity in the documents of an earlier decade or century."[14] Along with Wallace and Ellis, these writers conceived of an enormous yet nebulous problem: cultural disintegration that most of America seemed not to notice. They railed against invisible problems in a shrunken genre while so much of highly educated America was busy getting rich. In short, their implicit reinvestment in the idea of the Great American Novel—one that would reflect and affect the nation—seemed almost delusional.

To appreciate the effect of this history on the authors of literary fiction, a comparison with their predecessors in the Gilded Age is useful. Social novelists at the turn of the twentieth century also grappled with fundamental and overwhelming economic change. The industrial revolution remade a largely rural nation into an

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longer generally agreed to be in the national interest. See: Douglas Davis, "Multicultural Wars," *Art in America* 18, no. 3 (February 1995): 47.

[13] Franzen, "Perchance to Dream," 3.

[14] Don DeLillo, "The Power of History," *New York Times*, September 7, 1997, http://www.nytimes.com/library/books/090797article3.html.

urbanized, consumerist one. Harvard economist Jeffry A. Frieden writes, "The opening years of the twentieth century were the closest thing the world had ever seen to a free world market for goods, capital and labor."[15] The period also marked the beginning of the large corporation, a brand new institution that vertically and horizontally integrated the country's resources, challenged the government's power, and became central and even authoritative in the everyday lives of Americans. The development of large-scale industrial capitalism, like the technology boom of the 1990s, allowed a group of self-made American men to become the richest in world history.

A large body of American fiction of the Gilded Age responded to economic change and transforming of a largely traditional, farm-based society. In the forthcoming Cambridge History of the American novel, James A. Zimmerman catalogs a huge body of American fiction that focused on business, labor, and finance. These novels fit into subgenres that reflected different ways of conceiving industrialization and its societal impact.[16] William Dean Howells' The Rise of Silas Lapham (1900), which Zimmerman categorizes as economic reform fiction, mistrusts the class fluidity that accompanied entrepreneur-led industrialism. The plot follows an uneducated industrialist as he expands his business and navigates elite Boston society. Its resolution is a restoration of the traditional hierarchy: Lapham realizes that his true place is on a rural farm.[17] Theodore Dreiser's Sister Carrie (1900), for

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[15] Jeffry Frieden, Global Capitalism: *Its Fall and Rise in the Twentieth Century*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2006), 16.
[16] James A. Zimmerman, introduction to *The Cambridge History of the American Novel*, ed. Leonard Cassuto (manuscript in possession of the author).
[17] William Dean Howells, *The Rise of Silas Lapham* Penguin classics edition (New York: Penguin Group, 1986); Zimmerman, introduction to *Cambridge History*.

Zimmerman a fiction of consumerism, fears the sheer power of the industrial forces reconstructing America but ultimately welcomes development and urbanization.[18] The title-character is 'carried' by trains, distant job opportunities, and the whims of her acquisitive nature from her pastoral town to Chicago and then to New York. She and America are implied in the first chapter's title: "A waif among forces."

Irrespective of their stance on America's industrial transformation, writers of the Gilded Age (and the Progressive Era) were emboldened by modernizing forces in another sense: their form, the novel, was lifted to popularity by a burgeoning market for entertainment. In fact, the same economic forces that made for rich subject matter also contributed to the novel's popularity. On the supply side, technological advances made book printing and distribution far cheaper; on the demand side, a combination of "diffuse, impersonal, extensive reading" and disposable income led to voluminous book buying.[19] The novel became a mass-market phenomenon: the years just before and after 1900 are considered the "Crazy Period" in publishing.[20] The prestigious magazines in which novels were often serialized powerfully affected public opinion. By "providing values and information to a society in which those needs were not fully met by relatives and friends," Daniel H. Borus argues, "reading was an essential component of [the] conversion" from antebellum to industrial society.[21] These conditions invited ambitious novelists to tackle the new era in capitalism.

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[18] Theodore Dreiser, *Sister Carrie* Signet Classic (New York: Penguin Group, 2000); Zimmerman, introduction *Cambridge History*.
[19] Daniel H. Borus, *Writing Realism: Howells, James, and Norris in the Mass Market* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina, 1989), 38-39.
[20] Ibid., 51
[21] Ibid., 38; The novel was potentially so effective as a tool of instruction that Howells thought he and the circle of writers who published in the *Atlantic* could shape their readership's views. He encouraged novelists ranging from Henry James to Mark Twain to Charles Chesnutt to reveal to readers the dangers of fluid, class-less society through critical realism. As the country's leading literary figure,

Just as a brief literary history of the Gilded Age helps convey the effect of electronic democracy on novelists of the 1990s, a glimpse at the political culture of the 1950s can put into context how much the writer's relationship with broader society had changed by the end of the millenium. The popularity of TV in the 1950s could have spelled doom for the literary novel. But the public's taste and the history of the culture industry during the decade tell a different story: serious fiction was both prestigious and commercially successful. For example, William Morris represented avowedly high-art writers such as Ralph Ellison and Robert Penn Warren.[22]

This substantial market for literary fiction indicates that in post-war America, powerful institutions vied for a cultural education and the tempering of free market capitalism. In other words, America had an institutional order that was conducive to the public's adoption of values besides the righteousness of enterprise. Judis describes a broker state in which business, no longer the dominant force, negotiated with labor and government; he considers this a "pluralist" arrangement in which "all the major groups within society were adequately represented."[23] Paul Krugman, in The Conscience of a Liberal, provides a historical explanation for this balancing of interests: the Great Depression "shattered the nation's belief that business knows best" to such an extent that Republicans averse to the welfare programs were voted out of congress.[24]

Howells enjoyed influence that no one in American letters in the 1990s could have hoped for. See: Nancy Glazener, *Reading for Realism: the history of a U.S. literary institution, 1850-1910* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1997), 27.

[22] Brier, *A Novel Marketplace*, 10.

[23] Judis, *Paradox of American Democracy*, 4.

[24] Paul Krugman, *The Conscience of a Liberal* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2007), 74.

Like the Gilded Age's advent of industrial capitalism and 1990s financial prosperity, the post-war economic boom remade life for much of America. Corporations expanded dramatically in the decades after World War II, creating manufacturing and middle-management jobs that anchored the burgeoning middle class. Krugman notes a quieter trend that added to the middle class from the opposite end of society, the "pooring of the rich."[25] While millions were able to join the middle class and stay there, those at the top of the income bracket watched their share of national wealth decline dramatically. This owes in part to a marginal income tax rate that reached *92 percent* for the richest Americans in 1952.[26] Meanwhile, congress fiercely protected entitlement spending throughout the decade.[27] Howard Brick notes that dominant social theories of the day were able to feasibly imagine a "postcapitalist" society.[28]

The post-war order ideologically buttressed the nation's cultural activity. Even the era's reliance on bureaucracies (government, corporate, university etc.), Brier argues, encouraged literary expression. America wanted to separate itself from and trump highly-structured Soviet Russia through its cultural supremacy, and in this spirit, the nation "unit[ed] the fate of literature to the larger geopolitical struggle."[29]

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[25] Ibid., 40

[26] Internal Revenue Service Bulletin of Statistic, "Table A.--U.S. individual income tax: personal exemptions and lowest and highest bracket tax rates, and tax base for regular tax, tax years 1913-2003" (Rev. 4-2003), offered in Truth and Politics; "Top Tax Rates," http://www.truthandpolitics.org/top-rates.php.

[27] Krugman, *The Conscience of a Liberal*, 40.

[28] Howard Brick, *Transcending Capitalism: Visions of a New Society in American Thought*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2006.

[29] Brier, *A Novel Marketplace*, 152; broader society's support for the arts is epitomized by the American Book Publishers Council (ABPC), which helped competing publishers work together and with other institutions that promoted reading, notably universities and churches. It also formed the National Book Committee, in which a variety of elites worked together to encourage reading: the

In 1952, Lionel Trilling expressed his influential view that a securely middle-class society would allow artists and writers to exercise great power:

> In many civilizations, there comes a point at which wealth shows a tendency to submit itself to the rule of the mind, to refine itself, to apologize for its existence with a show of taste and sensitivity. In America, the tendency to this submission for some time has been apparent."[30]

Echoing Trilling, a 1952 survey in *The Partisan Review* asked participants if, "for better or for worse, most writers no longer accept alienation as the artist's fate in America."[31] The overwhelming majority agreed with the proposition. Cold War intellectuals largely celebrated America's embrace of liberal humanism.

The post-war ascendance of higher education was the institutional development that contributed most to the hospitable environment for serious literature. From 1945 to 1975, the American undergraduate population increased by an "unprecedented" and "almost certainly unrepeatable" 500 percent, which testifies not just to the size of the baby boom but also to the Federal government's commitment to expanding access to higher education through the G.I. Bill and other legislation like the National Defense of Education Act.[32] As Mark McGurl explains in The Program Era, the growth of higher education coincided with the elevation and institutionalization of modernist cultural ideals. English departments during the Cold War established the modernist novel as a curricular mainstay. This pedagogical effort, along with huge enrollments and mass-market textbook anthologies of short stories,

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group included a university president, publishing executives, and a Secretary of the Air Force (ibid., 151).

[30] Lionel Trilling, "Our Country and Our Culture," *Partisan Review* XIX (May/June 1952): 31 in Stephen Schryer, "Fantasies of the New Class: Ideologies of Professionalism in Post-World War II American Fiction," 1 (manuscript in possession of the author).

[31] William Phillips and Philip Rahv, editorial introduction to *Partisan Review* XIX (May/June 1952): 284 in Schryer, *Fantasies of the New Class*, 1.

[32] Louis Menand, *The Marketplace of Ideas* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2010), 64.

"introduc[ed] the elitist discourse of literary modernism to the self-same social masses it typically held in…contempt."[33] As Stephen Schryer explains, the Cold War university, "at the height of its influence," both materially and intangibly allowed writers and literary intellectuals with "postcapitalist" visions of society to enjoy "idealized sense[s] of their civilizing mission." Schreyer adds that the government's support for the humanities invited them to feel that they could exercise vague but nonetheless immense influence on broader society.[34]

The fiction of the period frequently shows how capitalism operates in conjunction with large-scale bureaucratic institutions that constrain market forces. It is often, in other words, "postcapitalist" in the sense that Howard Brick discusses contemporaneous social theory, frequently downplaying economic scarcity and competition and emphasizing large-scale institutions' societal impact. Two classic novels of the 1950s, for example, deal primarily with bureaucratization's ramifications for individual freedom. Sloan Wilson's The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit (1955), the classic middlebrow novel of the era, is comprised of two plotlines in this vein. In one, the corporation that employs protagonist Tom Wrath eventually invites him to switch from a stifling job to a creative position in which he writes fundraising speeches for its side project, a commission on mental health.[35] The new job idealizes the potential for writers to help their broader society and preserve their autonomy while participating in the corporate world. In the second, Wrath breaks up his grandmother's estate and begins building a middle-class development, which

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[33] Mark McGurl, *The Program Era: Post-war Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2009), 133.
[34] Schreyr, *Fantasies of the New Class*, 65.
[35] Wilson worked for SUNY Buffalo's public relations department, a Cold War university bureaucracy that promoted higher education.

stands in the fall of the industrial aristocracy of the early twentieth century. In both plotlines, a member of the professional middle class mitigates the free market.[36]

But novelists need not have been celebrants of corporate and governmental bureaucracies, as Wilson at least partially was, to recognize their influence on American society. Richard Yates' Revolutionary Road (1961) is concerned with middle-class sterility. It follows a young couple that tries melding its creative energies into corporate work and suburban life—a liberal humanist life plan comparable to the one underlying The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit. Protagonist Frank Wheeler finds only limited pleasure in writing copy for a national corporation. His wife, April, inaugurates a community theater, but the first production crumbles around her. The novel can thus be seen as resting on the hope for a cultured middle-class society that critics like Trilling already thought was in the making. Its tragic end points to a different view of the decade: that it fostered conformity inhospitable to creative work. Nonetheless, that the Wheelers could even imagine this life (and a romantic escape to Paris in which a large-scale government bureaucracy would pay April a substantial salary to work as a secretary) testifies to the material comfort of the creative middle class. Yates worries for the Wheelers souls, not the hazards of economic change.[37]

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[36] Sloan Wilson, *The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit* first Four Wall Eight Windows edition (New York: Four Wall Eight Windows, 1955).

[37] Richard Yates, *Revolutionary Road*, first Vintage Contemporaries mass market edition (New York: Random House, 2009); Thomas Hill Schaub, in his classic survey American Fiction in the Cold War, describes how the unraveling of the post-war order and its liberal humanist efforts deprived novelists of their power. While the 1950s encouraged third person accounts of economic and social change, future decades left novelists thinking that that sort of commentary would be ineffective. So, they turned away from politics and wrote first-person inner-directed, psychologically-centered satires. Fiction of the 1990s was certainly influenced by these novelists, the Black Satirists, but it also diverted from their work: only one of the novels studied here, American Psycho, uses a first-person narrator. Perhaps the style merely ran its course. Or perhaps the rise of finance and the larger deifying of

The post-war liberal order, the support system of America's liberal humanism, crumbled and fell roughly in sync with the Berlin Wall. This sea change is observable in economics, politics, and even university politics, all of which were realigned in the last decades of the twentieth century in the service and spirit of the profit motive. One of many competing explanations for this phenomenon highlights that the American middle class was squeezed by patterns of globalization and the fall of organized labor. Echoing this case in a recent column in *The New York Times*, Paul Krugman writes that "since 1990 or so" the American job market has been characterized by a "hollowing out" of middle-class wages.[38]

But the novels studied in this thesis emphasize the 1990s stock market boom as an agent of radical change. A comparison of the different trajectories of the Dow Jones Industrial Average, a composite of thirty industrial giants, and the NASDAQ, a composite of thousands of nearly three thousand technology companies, captures the market's redistribution of power in the decade. While the Dow grew by 318 percent between 1990 and 2000, the NASDAQ faired even better: it grew by 795 percent. The comparison suggests that the mainstays of the century-old industrial framework succeeded in a robust economy after being decimated by the oil crises and inflation of the 1970s and the onslaught of Japanese competition and corporate raids of the 1980s. Meanwhile, it also indicates that a new breed of start-ups, which harnessed computing

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capitalism called for a new, more politically-engaged literary response. See: Thomas Hill Schaub, *American Fiction in the Cold War* (Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1991).

[38] Paul Krugman, "Degrees and Dollars," *New York Times*, March 7, 2011, http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/07/opinion/07krugman.html.

power, supplanted these industrial giants by creating the next paradigm for American economic growth.

A "fundamental change" in market participation allowed the public to profit from the boom en masse, and the demographic makeup of the participants points to further redistributions of power.[39] 34 percent of households owned stocks in 1989, a figure which rose to 50 percent by 1998.[40] This increase occurred disproportionately among the young: 28 percent people under thirty-five owned stocks in 1992, and 49 percent did in 2001.[41] Cornell economist Vicki Bogan offers the advent of internet trading as an explanation for the overrepresentation of young (and thus presumably computer-using) Americans in stock markets in the 1990s.[42] In effect, then, the same high-technology on which NASDAQ companies built their businesses also facilitated the public's investment in their stocks. While the young disproportionately entered the stock market, wealthy Americans began investing more heavily as well. The richest 10 percent of households owned 85 percent of mutual funds and stocks, which Hui Guo, an economist at the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, attributes to steep inequalities in education, market information, inheritance, and the ability and willingness to invest in potentially volatile markets.[43] Disparities in income distribution reflect stock market participation: the share of national income owned by the richest 5 percent began a steady ten-year rise in 1990 from 18 percent to 22

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[39] Vicki Bogan, "Stock Market Participation and the Internet," *Journal of Financial and Quantitative Analysis* 43, no. 1 (2008): 191-212, dyson.cornell.edu/faculty_sites/bogan/doc/research/31244854.pdf.
[40] Ibid., 192.
[41] Ibid., 209.
[42] Ibid., 209.
[43] Hui Guo, "A Simple Model of Limited Stock Market Participation," *Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis Review* 37, no. 3 (2001): 37, research.stlouisfed.org/publications/review/01/.../37-48Guo.qxd.pdf.

percent in 2000, while the poorest 80 percent lost out.[44] The boom, as a source of income distribution, therefore tended to benefit already privileged people who were savvy enough to invest—or who could afford financial advice or products.

The incredible performance of financial markets in the 1990s was instrumental in another economic development, the growth of financial services in America. In 1952, finance employees received under 3 percent of the nation's total compensation, but by 2000, they received 7 percent.[45] This expansion is in keeping with a larger restructuring of the economy. Starting after the 1972 productivity slowdown, the so-called FIRE sector (finance, real estate, and insurance) grew enormously.[46] Its share of national income was just over 10 percent in 1952 and ballooned to more than 18 percent by 1997.[47] By (claiming to) provide expert advice and funneling savings into lucrative investment opportunities, FIRE allowed Americans to spend. National Income and Products Accounts (NIPA) data shows that the household savings rate had decreased steadily since the mid 1980s and went below 0 percent in 2005 for the first time since the Great Depression.[48] Economic activity of the 1990s was thus at the heart of the excessive consumer spending and borrowing that led to the 2008 credit crisis.

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[44] U.S. Census Bureau; *Historical Income Tables*, H-1 All, http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/income/data/historical/inequality/index.html.
[45] Özgür Orhangazi, *Financialization and the US economy* (Chelthenham, UK: Edward Elgar, 2006), 16.
[46] Eric Janszen, "The next bubble: Priming the markets for tomorrow's big crash," *Harper's*, February 2008, 40, http://harpers.org/archive/2008/02/0081908.
[47] Orhangazi, *Financialization and the US Economy*, 14.
[48] Massimo Guidolin and Elizabeth A La Jeunesse, "The Decline in the U.S. Personal Savings Rate: Is It Real and Is It a Puzzle?" *Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis Review* 89, no. 6 (2007): 492, research.stlouisfed.org/publications/review/07/11/Guidolin.pdf.

The widening income gap, financialization of the economy, and fiscal irresponsibility were mirrored in America's new political priorities: unregulated profit-maximizing and the promotion of special interests. During the 1990s, bitter partisanship replaced the relative political restraint that predominated in the Cold War as well as the bipartisan agreement that national elites should act as trustees on behalf of the nation. This transformation, which was epitomized by the Republican Party's shutdown of the Federal government in 1995 and later investment in impeaching President Clinton, was, according to Judis, also evident the Clinton Administration's political style. Its decisions, especially after the defeat of its health care initiative (in itself a testimonial to the end of liberal stewardship), were "dominated" by public opinion polling. Political consultant Dick Morris introduced the idea of the "bite-sized program" that would appear to confront social ills without substantively altering policy.[49]

In fact, although the lion's shares of both parties supported regulatory government and the social safety net in the post-war period, regulation was out of fashion by the 1990s. Neoliberalism—an economic philosophy, famously propounded by Milton Friedman, that insisted that markets be free of government intervention—became the guiding ideology of both Republicans and "New Democrats" associated with the Clinton administration. The passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994, which threatened millions of American manufacturing jobs in the name of liberalization, testifies to changed priorities.[50]

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[49] Judis, *Paradox of American Democracy*, xi.

[50] While 1950s politics was characterized by bipartisanship, a culture of resentment emerged as a defining force in later decades. Liberal and conservative commentators from Judis to Christopher Lasch, though they differed on the new culture's causes and potential solutions, agreed that the

America's prioritization of the profit-motive was glaringly on display in higher education's de-funding of the humanities. This policy change jeopardized the bulwark of the nation's literary culture since at least the Cold War. In The Marketplace of Ideas, Louis Menand joins a host of commentators in arguing that since the "Golden Age" of American education (1945-1975), a combination of demographic, economic, and cultural shifts undid the Cold War university's commitment to disciplines such as literary studies and art history that could not be aligned with military and corporate interests as easily as the hard sciences. Menand writes that 1975 marked "the beginning of serious economic pressures on the liberal arts college…[which] translates to pressure on the humanities disciplines." In other words, the introduction of rigorous accounting to university budgeting threatened the humanities, whose direct pay-off can seem hard to identify.[51] In Unmaking the Public University: The Forty Year Assault on the Middle Class, Christopher Newfield considers this devaluation of the humanities a symptom of the decade's prevailing lens: "Market thinking saw cultural disciplines as second-class: they made no money now and obviously never would." Public acculturation, it appears, was no longer in the national interest. This shift in priorities is the subject of and motivating force behind the novels discussed in this thesis.

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public had grown distrustful of elites and cynical of government. Disappointing electoral participation confirms this observation: voter turnout was 48.9 percent in the 1996 presidential election, the lowest since 1924, and in the 1998 Congressional races, it was the lowest since 1942, a wartime election. See: ibid., x; Christopher Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and Its Critics* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1991).

[51] Menand, *Marketplace of Ideas*, 68; Menand notes that his book is part of a larger trend: drastic changes in their profession have encouraged many English professors to look into the history of higher education (ibid., 20).

1. Midwesterners in The Corrections

In his essay "Perchance to Dream," a *Harper's* cover story from five years before the publication of his novel The Corrections (2001), Jonathan Franzen applauds Paula Fox, the author of the short novel Desperate Characters (1970), for "daring to equate a crumbling marriage with a crumbling social order."[52] Franzen proceeds to offer a now widely known complaint: that the 1990s economic boom and its surrounding feverish culture dwarfed the capacity of the social novel, and thus, that a bold stance such as Fox's was no longer feasible within the genre. Nonetheless, The Corrections is motivated by an equation similar to the one at the heart of Desperate Characters: a disconnected and unfulfilled family represents a disconnected and unfulfilled nation. Franzen's book attempts to do what his essay implied might no longer be possible: offer an encompassing and compelling moral critique of America's economic transformation in the form of a social novel.

The novel's family is the Lamberts. Enid, the wife and mother of three now in her seventies, presents a simple wish in the introduction, to get the family back together for one last Christmas. She and her husband Alfred live in St. Jude, Iowa in the same home where they raised their children, all of whom are now grown and

[52] Franzen, "Perchance to Dream," 2.

living on the East Coast.[53] The hope of gathering the family helps Enid cope with her thoroughly unsatisfying marriage and her adult children's shortcomings.

Seven years prior, Alfred irrevocably irked Enid. Despite the promise of larger income, he refused to work for the rapacious holding company that swallowed up his regional railroad Midland Pacific. Alfred's attachment to his principles is his defining trait. The incompatibility of Alfred's rigor and the laxness of the 1990s is dramatized by his disorienting Parkinson's-like neurological decay. He attempts to recreate a Midwestern ideal of manly self-reliance in the basement and paints and repaints wicker furniture. But he can get nothing accomplished: even his limbs refuse to obey his authority.

Enid is in far better health, and unlike the stolid Alfred, she is a born striver. During World War II, she turned down two prior suitors because they had not yet proven their earning power. In the novel's present, Enid continues to resent that Alfred did not make as much money as she hoped and in compensation trumpets (and exaggerates) her kids' accomplishments.

After introducing Enid and Alfred, Franzen dedicates the remainder of his novel to their three children, each of whom is given a main section of the narrative. The complexity and despair of their stories renders Enid's wish to recreate a happy family dinner mere nostalgia.

The first of these sections is dedicated to Chip, the second son and middle child. Chip has fallen short of his father's masculine ideal. As the former leather-jeans-wearing first male at D____ College to teach Queer Theory, he was recently a

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[53] As other commentators have noticed, St. Jude is the patron saint of lost causes. This chapter will argue, in short, that Franzen imagines St. Jude's traditional culture as a nearly lost source of authority that The Corrections attempts to revive.

humanities academic of the "tenured-radical" variety made familiar in the 1990s culture wars. But when Chip is introduced, he, much like his father, has lost his productivity and has slipped into depression. After being fired from his college for having an affair with an undergraduate, Chip now lives in downtown Manhattan, where he tries desperately to write a screenplay that will take revenge on the student who seduced him. A revealing flashback of Chip's childhood establishes another connection between him and his father. Alfred looks on as Chip refuses to eat his vegetables and falls asleep at the dinner table instead. He sees his stubborn dedication to his principles in his son. This connection is important in Franzen's novel. It hints that, beneath the aimless pleasure-seeking that at first appears to define him, Chip has his father's moral rectitude

The novel's second section shows elder son Gary and his family in leafy suburban Philadelphia. After graduating from Wharton, he has been hired by a mutual fund where he works as a portfolio manager selecting among profitable blue chip companies. His job imposes little stress and pays very well—the strength of the stock market in the 1990s guarantees his success.

While Chip is aligned with their principled father, moreover, Gary is associated with their desirous mother Enid. As a child, Gary enjoyed a remarkably close relationship with his mother, often playing with her as an equal. A similarly weak barrier between parents and children characterizes his own family. His wife, Caroline, who inherits a good deal of money, has stopped working and spoils her kids. They have three boys, two of whom are notable: Aaron is entranced by technology and demands expensive surveillance equipment and Jonah is a socially-

isolated reader. Gary virtually disappears at the end of the novel, leaving his brother to care for their father.

The youngest Lambert child is the lone daughter, Denise. She is introduced in a flashback to the 1970s as a high school student near the top of her class. The summer before college, she works at the drafting unit Midland Pacific and loses her virginity to a middle-aged colleague. The novel later explains that Alfred has learned of this affair, but with great restraint, he has decided not to fire the man who has seduced his daughter or even to bring up the subject with her. Denise drops out of college and makes a successful career as a high-end chef, a job made possible by economic prosperity and its accompanying culinary renaissance. She is also the novel's most likable woman and, perhaps relatedly, the only lesbian among its major characters.[54]

With this family history, Franzen provides a panorama of economic change in the latter half of twentieth century America. The swallowing up of Alfred's employer, Midland Pacific, represents the decline of heavy industry as the anchor of the modern Midwestern economy, and the end of Alfred's career, in turn, captures the diminishment of the company man who could rise to middle management and expect fair treatment for his hard work. The Wroth brothers, leverage buy-out kings who purchase and restructure Midland into unrecognizable satellite companies, are

[54] It would be hard to argue that Franzen treats women fairly. The men in the novel are flawed, but the women, excluding Denise, are deeply unsympathetic. Like Enid, the minor characters Melissa Pacquette, Bea Meisner, Robin Pasafaro, and Eden Procuro are depicted as narcissists or social strivers.

Franzen's version of Gordon Gekko. Like the *Wall Street* villain, they satirize how financiers used junk bonds to reshape corporate America.[55]

The Lambert children are equally reflective of their era. Wharton graduate Gary works for a regional bank that, buoyed by the market's rise, starts a mutual fund and can afford to pay him handsomely. In that way, Gary highlights the way that well-placed people in the 1990s could harness a robust economy to make money without working particularly hard. Meanwhile, Chip's backstory, his marginal existence as an assistant professor at D_____ College, reminds us that the decade's prosperity coincided with the de-funding of the humanities, the corporatization of the university (hinted at by the college building in which he has an office: Wroth Hall), and the declining prestige of cultural elites more generally. The section on Chip, who sought out the once safe and prestigious tenure track, thus reinforces a point made by much of the social reportage running through the novel: people who follow the rules of the old regime of the American economy, including Alfred, are trumped by those who defy tradition. The same transition is sketched in Denise's career as well. She is the chef in a fashionable restaurant serving faux ethnic food in an old power plant. The restaurant itself is a microcosm of economic and cultural change: a site of

[55] A junk bond has a high risk of default but also a higher rate of return. Legendary Wall Street firm Drexel Burnham Lambert, taking advantage of loose monetary policy in the Reagan era, created and offered these bonds to entrepreneurs and corporate raiders in the 1980s and then started an exchange on which they could be traded. Junk bonds, along with derivatives (a subject in the next chapter), came to epitomize the financial innovations of the late twentieth century that are blamed for causing the 2008 panic. Franzen thus names the Wroth brothers aptly: they cause wrath. See: Michael Lewis, *Liar's Poker: Rising Through the Wreckage on Wall Street* paperback edition (New York: Penguin Group, 1990).

socially-useful engineering has been converted to a den of conspicuous consumption, the engine of the postmodern American economy.[56]

In short, although Franzen worried in his essay "Perchance to Dream" that the social novelist could no longer keep up with cultural change, he does just that. The Corrections, with timely minutiae (e.g. Mira Sorvino, salmon), takes advantage of the genre's capacity to anatomize the manners and mores that vary with market cycles, thereby revealing fundamental but overlooked economic history. In addition to the Lamberts, the novel's rich, diverse, and often satirical cast of minor characters—including internet millionaires, faddish publishers, post-Cold War Eastern European hustlers, and liberal-arts-graduates-cum-social-reformers—constitutes an admirably extensive account of the 1990s. The Corrections is a discursive protest on behalf of its genre. It is thus unsurprising to find a valorization of literature implicit in the novel—and a suggestion that it amounts to a moral alternative to the financial economy.

In fact, although it is not immediately apparent amid the maze of details in The Corrections, an easily reducible moral structure—one that vindicates writers and readers of novels like Franzen's—underlies its vast chronicling of economy and culture. A dichotomy of the serious and the frivolous divides the three-generational cast. Alfred typifies the former, and he is joined by Denise, Gary's son Jonah, and increasingly as the novel progresses, Chip. Enid embodies the latter, and she is joined by her favorite child Gary, Caroline, their two other sons, and her neighbor Chuck

[56] The food satire is also trenchant in the section on Chip in New York: "He found ripe avocadoes that were the size of limes and cost $3.89 apiece. He stood holding five of them and considered what to do. He put them down and picked them up and put then down and couldn't pull the trigger" (93).

Meisner. The first group, the serious, takes on difficult work and remains ethical. The second, the frivolous, tries to make money without working too hard and displays poor ethics.

The novel's self-reflexivity emerges out of this division: the serious and ethically-principled are also readers of substantive literature, and the frivolous and ethically-compromised are not. Alfred heavily annotates Schopenhauer, Jonah takes to the basement to read the *Narnia* series, Chip, as a professor of Textual Artifacts, reads for a living (though not initially the right literature), and Denise makes time to read more than Chip does despite working tirelessly as a chef. Gary, Aaron, Caleb, and Chuck Meisner are never seen with books.[57]

Gary's wife, Caroline, has a stack of parenting books with the same thesis, to let your children do as they please. For Franzen, this is the wrong kind of reading. It is not only unserious material but it also resists the idea of authority. He would prefer that Caroline read serious literature that asserts its authority over her and encourages her to establish herself as an authority over her children.[58] But in the novel's depiction of the 1990s, that type of reading, serious and socially instructive, has all but vanished.

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[57] The fake discipline Textual Artifacts lampoons the jargon of academic language and laments that the text has become an artifact in American culture—two positions important to Franzen.

[58] Permissive parenting and immaturity are important to Franzen. In a recent *NPR* interview on his novel Freedom (2010), Franzen submitted that the 2008 financial crisis pointed to the irresponsibility of elites both in the industry and in government, asking: "Where were all the parents?" He also spoke poignantly of his father's death and of having to assume his role. Franzen adds that the contemporary family is characterized by a problematic lack of division between parents and children. See: Jonathan Franzen, "Jonathan Franzen Takes the Long Road to 'Freedom,'" *NPR*, September 11, 2010, http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=129799680.

This entire dichotomy establishes the major premise of Franzen's novel. The Corrections looks at an America in the 1990s rendered unrecognizable by finance capitalism, and its moral critique emphasizes cultural anarchy rather than economic inequality or political injustice. Read through the lens provided by Franzen's essay "Perchance to Dream," The Corrections can be understood as diagnosing a decline in the community of readers of serious social novels and bringing to mind that community's connection with an unraveling of middle-class responsibility and moral order. Less evidently, the novel holds out hope for a revival of these values.

The notion of an ethically-minded reading community Franzen articulates in "Perchance to Dream" fittingly seems to draw from Lionel Trilling's case for fiction in his seminal essay "Manners, Morals and The Novel." In this essay, Trilling gives a short rendition of his influential view that literature should offer moral training to the rising professional-managerial class of the mid-century corporate economy. Trilling writes that novelists serve a social function: exposing the gap between the "illusions" of social snobbery and the truth of "social reality," and thus offer training in "moral realism." The readers who benefit from these teachings are the "responsible, literate, middle class" who seek out serious fiction for its moral instruction. They are, or at least have the potential to become, broader society's moral anchors.[59]

In the 1990s, Franzen laments, novelists can no longer exercise the influence Trilling envisions. Trilling's "responsible, literate, middle class" no longer exists, and its reading tastes have splintered into different literary subgenres that avoid sweeping

[59] Lionel Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination: Essays on Literature and Society* (New York: Harcourt Brace Janovich, 1940), 195.

statements on the nation's moral character or have been absorbed by TV.[60] For Franzen, the implications are dire. He writes in "Perchance to Dream": "My father, who was not a reader, nevertheless had some acquaintance with James Baldwin and John Cheever, because *Time* magazine put them on the cover, and *Time*, for my father, was the ultimate cultural authority. . .The dollar is now the yardstick of cultural authority."[61] Without Trilling's favored class paying attention, art loses its moral authority, and society, now unchecked, loses its way.

In Franzen's bleak portrait of contemporary culture, novelists protect and maintain otherwise imperiled values. He writes, "Whether they think about it or not, novelists are preserving a tradition of precise, expressive language; a habit of looking past surfaces into interiors; maybe an understanding of private experience and public context as distinct but interpenetrating; maybe mystery, maybe manners."[62] Franzen's message to the remaining readers of social novels is a grand gesture of commiseration, a cry for a redistribution of cultural capital in their favor.

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[60] In "Perchance to Dream," Franzen singles out ethnic literatures and their counterpart in the academy, identity politics. He believes that these developments have shifted public attitudes so that a big picture novel of America will only feel relevant to straight white males. He insists that the American experience is a united one, arguing that a black lesbian from New York and a Baptist man in rural Georgia "both watch Letterman every night, both are struggling to find health insurance, both have jobs that are threatened by the migration of employment overseas, both go to discount superstores to purchase Pocahontas tie-in products for their children, both are being pummeled into cynicism by commercial advertising, both play Lotto, both dream of fifteen minutes of fame, both are taking a seratonin reuptake inhibitor, and both have a guilty crush on Uma Thurman." The Corrections, he assumedly hopes, applies to both. A skeptic would argue that what Franzen prizes, moral instruction towards the whole nation, is irrelevant because they ignore the particulars of different gender, ethnic, and socio-economic experiences. In other words, Franzen's vision of an America that everyone can relate to is merely a white, upper-middle-class, Midwestern splinter. See: Franzen, "Perchance to Dream," 5.

[61] Ibid.

[62] Ibid., 11.

Franzen's 'correction' of 1990s America is therefore also a revival. His twin objects of nostalgia are a literate society and the Midwest. He expresses their connection by analogy: "The institution of writing and reading serious novels is like a grand old Middle American city gutted and drained by superhighways."[63] Like reading, the industrial Midwest is a source of traditional values rendered obsolete by economic, technological, and cultural change.

The novel celebrates its historical memory through Alfred Lambert. In a flashback to the 1960s, Alfred compares the Erie Belt railway line with the Midland Pacific, "which served a harder-working, less eastern region of the country." Franzen emphasizes Alfred's dedication to his work: "The more Alfred saw of the Erie Belt, the more distinctly he felt the Midland Pacific's superior size, strength, and moral vitality in his own limbs and carriage" (243).[64] With deep connections to the land and his job, Alfred represents the region's diligence, moral authority, and responsibility. It is unsurprising, given Franzen's impassioned analogy, that Alfred is also an upholder of literary culture.

Alfred, however, is not superficially literary. He is quiet, repressed, masculine, and interested in science. Nonetheless, he embodies Trilling's ideal of middle-class responsibility and carries out the work of the novelist as described in "Perchance to Dream." Alfred has "precise, expressive language" and "a habit of looking past surfaces into interiors." While Gary berates him about his medical condition, Alfred can tell that his son merely projects his own misery. Alfred

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[63] Ibid., 3; Franzen has recently said that the success of The Corrections indicated that there were many more readers of novels like his than he had imagined (Franzen, "The Long Road to 'Freedom'").
[64] Jonathan Franzen, *The Corrections* (New York: Picador, 2001). All subsequent quotes from the text in this chapter will be in parentheses.

insightfully declares, “Mark my words. I look at your marriage, I see what I see. Someday you’ll see it too” (174). Alfred takes on the social novelist’s prototypical project as it is outlined by Trilling and championed by Franzen: unearthing what is behind the façade of social reality.

Contrasting Alfred Lambert with his neighbor Chuck Meisner—a small town banker who will later be shown to have profited from insider trading in the 1960s and thus to foreshadow financial chicanery later in the century—Franzen represents the basic conflict between those who have appropriated the ethical lessons of serious literature and those who have not. Chuck, Alfred’s inverse, is defined by looseness of appearance, manners, and ethics. Unlike Alfred who braved the worst of the Depression (a “west Kansan drought”), Chuck cannot authentically claim connection to the hardships of Midwestern life: “Chuck had grown up on a farm near Cedar Rapids, and the optimism of his nature was rooted in the deep, well-watered topsoil of Eastern Iowa” (246). Fittingly, Franzen arranges for Chuck to take advantage of Alfred by illegally trading on information about railroad construction that he has weaseled from his neighbor. Realizing his lapse in judgment, Alfred asks Chuck not to betray his trust by appealing to a framework of shared values: “You’ll keep that information quiet…You’re a good friend and a good Christian.” (247). Alfred’s appeal is, predictably, not heeded.

In “Perchance to Dream,” Franzen explains how the diminishment of the social novel has coincided with the ascendance of a generation of Chuck Meisners. He laments that the prosperity and technology of the 1990s have obviated the novel as

a tool of moral instruction and instead replaced it with quick-fixes, which in turn breeds the laxity Alfred so detests. Art and religion were once the "historically preferred methods of coming to terms with" the spiritual needs of modern life, which he terms the "Ache." Franzen adds that the "Ache" arises from the inevitable discoveries the we are "not…, each of us, the center of the universe" and that "our desires [are] forever outnumbering our means of satisfying them."[65] In America in the late twentieth-century, however, the traditional spiritual functions of art and religion have been rendered obsolete by a media landscape that offers easy gratification. "What happens to art," Franzen asks, "when our technological and economic systems and even our commercialized religions become sufficiently sophisticated to make each of us the center of our own universe of choices and gratifications?" This question makes a bold assumption: that advancements of the 1990s *have* made first-world citizens perfectly gratified masters of their universes.

The rendering of American society in the 1990s in The Corrections can be broadly understood as evidence in support of this tragic claim: with sudden wealth and vast new technology, upper-middle-class Americans have the luxury of disregarding art and the spiritual needs it serves. By extension, Franzen implies, their society has suffered a decay of authority.

The novel makes this case by updating Chuck Meisner in its portrait of Gary Lambert. Following the novel's equation of ethics and cultural seriousness, Gary is a

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[65] Franzen, "Perchance to Dream," 6; considered in this light, The Corrections asks what happens when one half of Franzen's pair, art, loses relevance. In Partial Faiths, John McClure argues that American fiction of the late twentieth century, including DeLillo's work, can be read as an attempt to make sense of a culture without the other half, religion. See: John A. McClure, *Partial Faiths: Postsecular Fiction in the Age of Pynchon and Morrison* (Athens, Georgia: The University of Georgia Press, 2007).

callow man with loose morals and bad taste. Damningly, he met his wife at a Bob Seeger concert and counts "Time after Time" as one of his two favorite songs. Meanwhile, his spouse Caroline neglects the Winslow Homer and Andrew Wyeth paintings she has inherited from her Quaker family and makes little effort to attend to her children's cultural education.[66] The couple's disrespect for art, and their related disregard of the authority the novel insists it deserves, is reflected in their unpleasant family life: its manners are poor and its organization is anarchic. Having been brought up differently, Gary knows that something is wrong with the way his family acts but lacks the gumption to change its dynamic.

More importantly, however, Gary's poor taste is echoed in his lack of business ethics. While Chuck Meisner is viewed as an outlier for his illegal trading in Iowa in the 1960s, Gary epitomizes his era. Like Chuck, Gary is a lazy banker: he "silently vowed never to work later than five o'clock and never to bring a briefcase home at night" (192). The telling contrast is with his father, who, during Gary's childhood, works late and brings home a chemistry set to test new metals for his company and files several patents. Further resembling Chuck more than his father, Gary attempts to trade on insider information. When the Axon Corporation inquires about one of Alfred's patents decades after it has been filed, Gary interprets the inquiry as an indication of Axon's confidence in a new drug and thinks he has discovered a financial windfall. The drug, satirically named "Corecktall," promises to redesign brain chemistry and treat a "host of ailments typically considered psychiatric or even

[66] Franzen graduated from Swarthmore College, a Quaker school renowned for its intellectual seriousness.

psychological" (187). Gary maneuvers desperately to accumulate enough shares to make a killing.[67]

Franzen, underscoring Gary's baseness, compares his reaction to his sister's when the siblings learn that Corecktall may be useful in treating Alfred's neurological problems. Denise—who, not incidentally, is the family's most voracious reader along with the inheritor of their father's work ethic—wants to approach the company and ask if Alfred can be a participant in the therapy's trials. But Gary, the uncultured son, can only smell profit. Gary's greed is drawn out by a mercenary biotechnology company—a member of the sector that, along with internet start-ups, helped drive the NASDAQ. What Gary willfully ignores is that Corecktall is a consumer fantasy.[68]

Franzen's notion of the "Ache"—and his concern that the responsibility of art and religion to address it has been displaced—helps explain this scientific subplot. Corecktall is a satirical proof of the claim from "Perchance to Dream" that technology can help people cope with their unimportance and unsatisfied desires so effectively that art loses its relevance. Franzen invites a comparison between his own novel, The Corrections, and the drug with which it competes, Corecktall, through their unapologetically similar names. A comparative analysis is telling: The Corrections protests the obsolescence of the social novel by asserting its power to make 'corrections' to the culture, but Corecktall, an anti-literary butchering of the language, triumphantly declares that it will solve all of America's problems.

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[67] Corecktall is an exaggeration of a Selective Seratonin Reuptake Inhibitor (an SSRI), the class of drug that most famously includes Prozac. The clues are the slow reworking of brain chemistry (similar to the mysterious method of an SSRI), and the corporation's name, Axon, which is also the part of nerve cells that SSRIs apparently work on. Corecktall shows up elsewhere in the novel: in its illegal form, Mexican A, which figures prominently in Chip's early downfall, and its quasi-legal form, Aslan, to which Enid briefly becomes addicted on a cruise. Chip and Enid are therefore, for much of the novel, susceptible to the seductive logic of drugs and consumerism more generally.

According to Franzen, a people who use anti-depressants instead of novels to cope might be happy, but they lack literature's moral authority. This is because SSRIs can replicate the novel's ability to provide refuge from life's difficulties, but they cannot teach good manners or instill ethics.

America's degeneracy in age when SSRIs replace social novels is brought to an extreme at the Axon Corporation's road show. The scene is a fictional rendition of a Wall Street tradition in which companies introduce themselves to investment banks to generate interest in initial public offerings of their stocks. For Franzen, this is a golden opportunity to satirize the grotesque exuberance surrounding the financial bubble of the 1990s. It is held at an enormous Four Seasons ballroom, and tables of bankers and equity salesmen cheer on the overzealous scientist who invented Corecktall. "So much money had flooded the system," Franzen writes, "that twenty-six year-olds who thought Andrew Wyeth was a furniture company and Winslow Homer a cartoon character were able to dress like Hollywood aristocracy" (194).[69]

A debate during the road show emphasizes how American cultural impoverishment and the rise of business-thinking have led to a dangerous deafness to ethical concerns. From the crowd of bankers and equity salesmen, a woman "probably from the endowment crowd from Penn or Temple" asks about how Corecktall seems to homogenize personalities and thus constitutes a coercive means of social engineering: "So, what's the idea, you reprogram the repeat offender to enjoy pushing a broom?" (194). The Axon spokeswoman's talking point and eschewing of complexity win over the room:

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[69] In "Perchance to Dream," Franzen writes, "I happen to enjoy living within subway distance of Wall Street and keeping close tabs on the country's shadow government" See: Franzen, "Perchance to Dream," 8.

> "Honey," Finch interrupted with the advantage of her lapel mike and amplification, "American people support the death penalty. Do you think they'll have a problem with a socially constructive alternative like this? Ten years from now we'll see which of us is dreaming. Yes, pink shirt at Table Three, yes?"...Mr. Twelve Thousand Shares of Exxon, at Gary's left shoulder, cupped his hands to his mouth and booed her. Young men at other tables followed suit, booing and smirking, having their sports-fan fun and lending support (194).

This exchange shows how a narrow interest in profit-making drowns out a dissenting ethical voice. Finch's "advantage" over the "endowment crowd," the microphone, reaffirms another major point for Franzen: universities can no longer effectively critique dominant society.[70]

The novel delves into university life more extensively with the section on Gary and Denise's brother Chip. D_____ College, where Chip works until he is fired, does not constitute an alternative and oppositional sphere to the outside world. The names of its facilities, Wroth Hall and Viacom Arboretum, stand in for the corporatization of the academy. Chip's living conditions, "semi-squalor" overlooking "car parts creek," testify to the declining prestige of the humanities academic (46).

Moreover, the scenes that show Chip in the classroom indicate that scholarly critiques of corporate capitalism no longer hold water with a complacent nation. Chip shows his students an advertisement in which the W_____ Corporation announces that it has given $10 million to breast cancer charities. He asks whether anyone in the class can apply Frankfurt School theories to explain how, in presenting itself as looking out for the best interests of the general public, the W_____ Corporation

[70] Corecktall also represents how the finance industry has repositioned neuroscience as a for-profit enterprise, taking it out of its traditional position as an academic discipline.

might be disingenuous. Melissa Pacquette, the student with whom Chip will have his ruinous affair, declares, "This whole class, it's just bullshit every week. It's one critic after another wringing their hands about the state of criticism. Nobody can ever quite say what's wrong exactly. But they all know it's evil. They all know 'corporate' is a dirty word" (44). The class agrees. In seeking the public's favor, the academy's arguments on corporate manipulation are no match for the consumer economy's gratifying offerings.

Though he positions himself in opposition to this dominant culture, Chip embodies its self-indulgence in another sense. When he is fired from his job and still wearing leather jeans, Chip wallows in his immaturity. He is a sybarite endlessly preoccupied with food and sex. He highlights the one-hundred seventeen times the word "breasts" appears in his own screenplay (27-28). The novel points out Chip's lack of development again when he is forced to sell his books, "his feminists, his formalists, his structuralists, his poststructuralists, his Freudians, and his queers" (42). Franzen criticizes these academic interests not on their own terms but for the same reasons he mocks SSRIs; they are dangerous and faddish replacements of the social novel. Not only do they challenge traditional structures of authority, "Perchance to Dream" complains, postcolonial studies and identity politics also place each minority group at "the center of the universe" and thus do away with the "Ache" that was once addressed in a deeper manner by art and religion. In the novel, Chip's anti-establishment politics and the finance industry share a defining selfishness.

Franzen portrays Chip as a young man who has fallen into confusion but who will ultimately find his way back to the moral values embodied by his father. His arc is a *bildungsroman* that follows Franzen's nostalgic wish for a return to Midwestern-style middle-class traditionalism. Chip has a sense early in the novel that, at least at the level of the family, a modicum of authority is necessary—an early clue that he will come to rediscover the importance of tradition. He has an affair with Melissa Paquette, whose parents epitomize how the wrong kinds of people have been emboldened by the economic boom of the 1990s. Melissa seduces Chip nonchalantly, and while in bed, explains to him how her parents, with equal nonchalance, started a mutual fund:

> My mom was in med school in New Haven and my dad had this punk band, the Nomatics, that was touring, and at my mom's first ever punk show she went out with my dad and ended up in his hotel room. . .See, and my dad had some money from a trust fund, and it was really brilliant what they did then. There were all these new IPOs, and my mom was up on all the biotech…Clair—my mom—stayed at home with me and we hung out all day…They were so, so in love….And finally it occurred to us, we *know* everybody, and we're really good *investors*, so why not start a mutual fund? (49-50).

Every detail in the paragraph undermines the traditional family values epitomized by Alfred Lambert: the parents met during a one-night stand, they get their start by risking inherited money, the mother uses her Yale medical education not to cure others but to turn a profit, they enter finance without any real expertise, and they treat Melissa as an adult by including her in the providing of income and keeping her away from her peers with pseudo-home-schooling. The result, in Franzen's depiction, is an arrogant and smarmy daughter who fits in with a culture of easy gratification and ethical shallowness. It is not a coincidence that she speaks on behalf of the W_____

Corporation's manipulative advertising in Chip's class and helps usher in his downfall by turning him on to "Mexican A"—an illegal form of Corecktall—which she scores from friends at Wesleyan.

Chip's evolution can be interpreted as 'correcting' Melissa's formative years. Over the course of the novel, he becomes the faithful, good child she never was. While he initially refuses to come home (he has not been back to St. Jude in three years), he eventually assumes his place in a patriarchal family structure. But Chip's self-indulgence and disrespect for authority must be overcome for him to develop. To shock Chip into respecting his father's values, the novel brings him on a sojourn to the anarchic landscape of post-Soviet Lithuania. There, he sees firsthand how the unrestricted movement of global capital and the breakdown of the rule of law create a demoralized Hobbesian universe. Lithuania is now "a privatized nation-state. . . a zone of semi-anarchy, criminal warlords and subsistence farming" (112). At first glance, Chip's verbal talents appear to allow him to prosper in this world. He falls in with a group planning an internet-based scheme to defraud Western investors who value his quick wit. But Chip is soon attacked, robbed, and stripped naked by thugs and thus undergoes a symbolic death. With his telltale leather jeans leather on the side of a highway in Lithuania, Chip returns as a prodigal to a home for which he has a new appreciation. "Nowhere in the nation of Lithuania," Chip realizes on returning home, "was there a room like the Lambert living room" (536).[71]

[71] Perhaps the novel warns that America, with its embrace of Neoliberalism, will eventually resemble Lithuania if it continues on its path. At the least, the scene suggests a case made by a host of economists: America's rush to include formerly closed countries in global capitalism reflects an overly simplistic faith in markets.

The novel's final pages show Chip having assumed the position of the dutiful son as he cares for his institutionalized father. The clear implication is that, unlike his brother Gary, Chip has given up on childish things. Wading through dementia, Alfred appears happy only when he sees Chip: "Chip seemed *beloved* to the old man" (544). Chip makes use of his literary ability—"precise and expressive language"—to help his father who cannot keep track of all of his doctors. "Chip was an intellectual and had ways of talking sense to these people," Alfred thinks, "Chip had done a good job yesterday, better than he could have done himself. Asked a simple question, got a simple answer, and then explained it in a way that man could understand" (550). Early in the novel, Chip uses his facility with language to write Queer Theory and dismantle the patriarchy; he now aids his ailing father, a prototypical patriarch himself, and accepts that family comes before self-serving philosophy. By the end, Chip has moved back to the Midwest and started a family of his own with a neurologist—who, unlike Melissa Pacquette's mother, has presumably completed medical school and will put her training to good use. Chip also finds gainful employment as a teacher in a private high school, a socially useful job that will afford him time with his family.

Chip's evolution is paralleled by a larger change of fortunes, "a year-long leakage of value from key financial markets" (561). The six-year economic boom that facilitates America's moral decline must end for Chip to mature. Following Trilling, Franzen shows that the decade's prosperity encourages striving and "social illusions," and his novel imagines the end of the financial bubble as bringing back proportion and perspective. Once the unsustainable rise of the NASDAQ stops, a moral

equilibrium can be restored. This return to normalcy is focalized through Enid, who, having become increasingly foolish and deluded during the novel along with many of its other major character, regains her judgment: "She saw everything more clearly now, her children in particular" (561).[72]

The Corrections can therefore be understood as a wide-ranging, satirical account of the reshaping of American society in the latter half of the twentieth century that rests on a conservative reverence for authority. Though the novel emphasizes the narcissism of the newly wealthy, it is even more dismissive of the political left, the working class, and the underclass. Denise's lover, Robin Pasafaro, is from "a family of troublemakers and true believers" who unfavorably represent these groups. Excluding Robin's father, a committed socialist who ultimately sticks by his brothers, the men are "unreconstructed" Teamsters (340). Robin feels "helplessly privileged" when, at a young age, she learns her brother was adopted (340). She continues feeling this way even as he taunts her into their teen years. Then, as an anti-globalization activist, he savagely breaks the skull of a corporate spokesperson with a two-by-four at a public event. The stereotypes of the culture wars continue with the novel's sole African-Americans, who trample Robin's community garden of organic vegetables. Denise displays liberal guilt much like her lover's when she loses her virginity to the Midland Pacific draughtsman: "Since she was the one who had everything, the problem was hers to solve" (365).

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[72] It is worth noting that this downturn in markets is "not an overnight bursting of a bubble but a more gentle letdown" (561). Franzen therefore places great faith in the age-old cycle of market 'corrections.' But given that the jury is still out on whether the 2008 financial panic has meaningfully reformed Wall Street, the novel's hope that a mere "gentle letdown" can restore calm and moral authority appears rather naïve.

In these and other ways, the novel suggests a deep disdain towards liberal and leftist responses to social injustices. Alfred Lambert's middle-class rectitude is its only source of virtue. The core of The Corrections is thus moralistic. But it is possible to mistake the novel for the work of a Pynchonian smart aleck rather than the product of a stodgy Midwesterner on the side of authority. Especially on a first reading, the tone can appear to be Gogolian in its dark comic irony, which could lead one to think that the whole novel is irreverent. In Laughter and The Novel, James Woods describes Franzen as a "cultural ironist, always a twisted adjective ahead of his characters."[73] And to be sure, the novel includes bursts of look-mom-no-hands postmodernism. But Franzen's comic irony serves a different purpose than that of a writer like Pynchon and reflects a more nostalgic sensibility.

In "Perchance to Dream," Franzen establishes Kafka as his ideal in this regard and praises what he calls Kafka's "tragic realism," a quality which allows the reader to be "sustained by darkness" instead of "immobilized by it."[74] Notably, "tragic realism" may have been adopted from Lionel Trilling who uses the phrase to describe how, in Freud's model of civilization, man's need for repression makes it such that "his best qualities are the result of a struggle whose outcome is tragic."[75] Such "tragic realism," which defines the heroic yet restrained Alfred Lambert, provides a model for the ambitions of Franzen's novel. Even its dark comedy emphasizes that authority, as Franzen tellingly puts it, can be "redemptive."[76]

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[73] James Wood *The Irresponsible Self: On Laughter and the Novel* (New York: Picador, 2004), 207.
[74] Franzen, "Perchance to Dream," 12.
[75] Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination*, 57.
[76] Franzen, "Perchance to Dream," 11.

Reading The Corrections with an eye towards David Foster Wallace's essay "E Unibus Pluram" touches on another way in which Franzen draws on yet ultimately opposes Pynchon's legacy in creating a nostalgic conservatism. Wallace argues that Pynchonian irony has become cultural law: TV sitcoms teach that in order to be cool, Americans must act with irreverence towards authority. They do so by depicting father figures with traditional values who are mocked by their wives and children.[77] Franzen designs The Corrections as a subversion of the law of irony as Wallace describes it. Alfred Lambert resembles Archie Bunker, except Alfred is intelligent and vindicated by the novel's moral logic. By resisting his wife's demands to invest in the stock market, which seems at first glance like an old man's destructive stubbornness, Alfred holds on to his modest savings. His son Gary, by contrast, who belittles his father as if he were a nastier version of a sitcom kid, "takes a bath" on Axon stock (562).

The ironic tone that predominates the beginning of The Corrections is, in short, a red herring. Like Chip, a young smart man capable of hilarious cynicism, the novel undergoes a *bildungsroman* of its own. It shifts from satire of the decade's frivolity ("Installed above the Nightmare's coffee bar was a screen that gave running ironic tallies of TODAY'S GROSS RECIEPTS" (93)) to solemn depictions of Alfred's deterioration ("Like a wife who had died or a house that had burned, the clarity to think and the power to act were still vivid in his memory" (556)). The novel itself matures to meet the serious task of chronicling the death of a serious man, and in his son Chip, the coming-of-age of a serious young man to replace him.

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[77] Wallace, "E Unibus Pluram," 165.

2. Men of Finance in Cosmopolis and American Psycho

In Don DeLillo's Cosmopolis (2003), hedge fund manager Eric Packer issues a course of study to a talented young mathematician: "There's only one thing in the world worth pursuing professionally and intellectually. What is it, Michael? The interaction between technology and capital. The inseperability" (23).[78] The novel takes its cue from Packer's advice and depicts New York at the turn of the millennium as buzzing with "the glow of cyber-capital" (78). DeLillo thus endows Packer with his own clarity of understanding and proposes a kindred connection between the financier and the artist. Cosmopolis, however, critiques Packer, and more broadly, the ways in which his industry has infused the culture with its narrowness of purpose and perspective.

In Packer, DeLillo presents a character whose status is so high that he eludes Franzen's panoramic account of America in the 1990s. At only twenty-eighty, he is a self-made multi-billionaire, and his fund, Packer Capital, is a kind of unacknowledged government of his universe. Though exaggerated, Packer's profile is nonetheless socially representative. The share of national income held by the top one percent of Americans spiked in the latter half of the 1990s. But the more telling story, according to a study by economists at the University of Texas, is that ultra-wealthy residents in a few concentrated areas skewed the distribution. These places include Manhattan, Kings County, Washington (home of Microsoft), and Silicon Valley.

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[78] Don DeLillo, *Cosmopolis* (New York: Scribner, 2003). All subsequent quotes from the text in this chapter will be cited with parentheses.

"Information technology in the late 90's" drove all of their economies.[79] As an emboldened beneficiary of this trend, Packer encounters no moral or societal checks in using his resources and intelligence to compound his wealth and power.

"The interaction between technology and capital" did not merely produce a plutocratic class. Cosmopolis proposes that by working creatively with this synthesis, finance became the high art of American culture. A 2009 piece in *The New Yorker* compared the invention of the derivative in finance in 1973 with the birth of modernism in literature, the publication T.S. Eliot's "The Wasteland."[80] DeLillo's novel similarly casts high finance as carrying on the legacy of modernist artists by taking the global economy and 'making it new' with investment schemes that connect and reformulate its vast reaches. But Cosmopolis does not defend financial genius. The furious trading of capital flows, physicalized in repeated references to digital stock tickers wrapping around buildings and screens, leaves the city in awe. Like Packer himself, New York is rendered eerily hollow and spiritually malnourished by this up-to-the-instant interest in money. Cosmopolis points out that finance's mode of

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[79] Hal Varian, "Many Theories on Income Inequality, but One Answer Lies in Just a Few Places," *New York Times*, September 21, 2006, http://www.nytimes.com/2006/09/21/business/21scene.html.

[80] John Lanchester, "Melting into Air: Before the financial system went bust, it went postmodern," *The New Yorker*, November 10, 2008, LexisNexis Academic; Cosmopolis actually alludes to "The Waste Land" with its opening inscription, "A Day in April." Eliot's poem creates a physical location that stands in for the modern condition. Perhaps Cosmopolis, situated solely in midtown Manhattan, attempts to do the same for postmodernity.

A derivative is a financial product with no tie to underlying assets (e.g. a company or a commodity). Its value is determined solely by its connections to other financial products (e.g. stocks, bonds, insurance). The 2008 financial crisis is almost universally blamed on the growth of complex derivatives. This chapter will argue that one of the two men credited with inventing the derivative in 1973, Myron Scholes, may have helped inspire DeLillo's Packer. Further, it is remarkably fitting that just as the derivative began changing the face of finance capitalism, the productivity slowdown halted America's industrial economy. Finance's ascendance perfectly coincided with the divergence of incomes and the collapse of the post-war liberal order.

organizing and observing human behavior is somehow deeply flawed, and it prophetically implies that this deficiency will undo the industry. In its conclusion, the novel offers an aesthetic solution to the financialization of society.

In DeLillo's dreamlike New York, high finance takes on the qualities and authority once reserved for high modernism. To start, money has evolved beyond its appropriate functions and moved into a conceptual and aesthetic realm. Packer's in-house philosopher explains, "Money has lost its narrative quality the way painting did once upon a time. Money is talking to itself" (77). It is as if in the world of derivatives, capital gains self-referentiality and complex beauty. Compounding its art-like status, money has ceased to be a store of value and instead has attracted vital creative powers. One of Packer's protégés declares, "I love information. This is our sweetness and light." This remark alludes to Matthew Arnold's influential view that art and culture should serve as "sweetness and light," lifting humanity out of the coarseness and specialization of modern life.[81] Technocapitalism, in DeLillo's world, has taken over that role.

Despite his baldly mercenary occupation, Packer figures as (and understands himself as) an artist. In a bit of DeLillo's characteristic absurdist irony, Packer tiles his limousine's floor with Carrara marble from the same quarry where Michaelangelo found his stone (22). The novel, in depicting Packer's aesthetically-coded investing brilliance, invites this comparison with the artist. One of Packer's employees declares

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[81] Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy: An Essay in Political and Social Criticism* Rethinking the Western Tradition Paperback (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994); insofar as Packer is able is to provide broader society with uplift, the novel echoes a post-credit crisis attack on the financial industry: that it drew too much creativity and human potential away from other, more socially useful occupations.

that his processing of information creates "meaning in the world. People eat and sleep in the shadow of what we do" (140). Packer himself cannot conceive a separation between art and commodity. He declares, for instance, that he intends to buy the Rothko Chapel. His art collecting advisor tries rebuffing him: "Forgive the pissy way I say this. The Rothko Chapel belongs to the world." Packer replies, "It's mine if I buy it" (28). He is not merely guilty of misconstruing his own self-serving work as art but also of depriving the larger society of art's influence.

DeLillo thus addresses the problem of postmodernity as it was originally conceived by Fredric Jameson. The postmodern age, according to Jameson, is defined by the way late capitalism subsumes creative production and thus precludes the creation and dissemination of autonomous art that would be genuinely critical of bourgeois society.[82] In Cosmopolis, Jameson's vision at first appears to have been realized. Packer's oversized stretch white limousine, a luxurious prison, resembles Jameson's description of the Bonaventura Hotel in Los Angeles.[83] In this respect, DeLillo also expands on Bret Easton Ellis's nightmarish account of the finance plutocracy and consumerism, American Psycho (1991). The main character of Ellis's novel, Patrick Bateman, is, like DeLillo's Packer, a brilliant twenty-eight year-old working on Wall Street without regard for cultural authority.[84] Ellis's vision, however, turns out to be more extreme than DeLillo's. Bateman is a serial killing

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[82] Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," *New Left Review* 146, (1984): 71, classweb.gmu.edu/sandrew3/.../nlr142jameson_postmodernism.pdf.
[83] Ibid., 88.
[84] In a subtle intertextual joke, Ellis also jests that Bateman could be a colleague of Sherman McCoy in Thomas Wolfe's The Bonfire of the Vanities (1987). McCoy works at a fictional firm called Pierce and Pierce—the same name of the company that employs the homicidal Bateman. While Packer is cast as the top of the Wall Street elite, Bateman is created so that he could be any of the thousands of anonymous young men of finance. See: Thomas Wolfe, *The Bonfire of the Vanities* (New York: Bantam Book, 1987).

sociopath with as little respect for human life as Packer has for public art. But in his famed monologues on music, clothing, and food, Bateman displays incredible care and precision when discussing embarrassing selections from a nakedly commodified culture. He finishes up a four-page essay on the brilliance of the pop band Genesis with, "I also think Phil Collins works better within the confines of the group than as a solo artist—and I stress the word *artist*. In fact it applies to all three of the guys, because Genesis is still the best, most exciting band to come out of England in the 1980s."[85] Such passages can be interpreted in Jamesonian terms: this is how people would talk about art if there were only a market and no countervailing sensibilities.

But DeLillo ultimately diverges from his predecessor. While Ellis appears to agree with Jameson's argument that late capitalism has all but engulfed the culture, DeLillo imagines an escape. The two writers' differing views are built into the designs of their novels. American Psycho is a circle of repeating episodes in which Bateman visits high-end nightclubs and murders with no indication of development. He is only more sadistic, miserable, and consumerist at the end. The novel's last line underscores this point: "THIS IS NOT AN EXIT."[86] In contrast, Cosmopolis has a linear narrative in which Packer develops in such a way that his artistry and humanity are released from finance's constraints, and more generally, from the postmodern market's stranglehold on expression. In the beginning, Packer is a brilliant intellect with aesthetic sense who works solely to amass unconscionable wealth and has thus allowed his artistic potential to be subsumed by capitalism. But he redeems himself

[85] Ellis, *American Psycho,* 132.
[86] Ibid., 399.

by getting in touch with alternative, non-rational sources of artistic power as the novel progresses.

To do so, he must leave the aerie of his own finance empire on the East Side of Manhattan and travel to the West Side. This journey from the affluent and civilized East Side to the ungentrified and primal West Side accounts for the entire plot of DeLillo's novel. It as if by running from finance, he eludes, in Jameson's terms, the domain of late capitalism. In his study of post-war American fiction Late Imperial Romance, John McClure observes that the DeLilloean travel narrative echoes Heart of Darkness: "The unmapped reaches of the imperial espionage system," McClure explains, "fascinate and repel DeLillo, just as the jungle served as host to the European adventurers and mysterious Africans that fascinated and repelled Conrad."[87] Like a latter day Captain Marlowe, Packer travels westward into unknown territory ostensibly untouched by the market.

Packer's journey takes a single day. He wakes up at dawn in his $104 million apartment on First Avenue and acknowledges his main responsibility: deciding whether to back out of a risky bet on the Yen that is costing him billions. But Packer is coolly indifferent to his hedge fund's future. Instead, he claims to care far more about getting a haircut on the far West Side. The novel later implicates other motives: a self-destructive inclination or a wish to return to his roots (Packer is from Hell's Kitchen, and his late father's best friend stills owns the barbershop). Traversing the city proves difficult, so Packer spends the novel creeping slowly through Midtown, apparently to cater to a mere whim. Meanwhile, Packer's hyper-rational investment strategy fails, destabilizing the global economy and Manhattan's homeostasis. With

[87] John A. McClure, *Late Imperial Romance* (London: Verso, 1994), 119-120.

his industry imploding on the East Side, Packer simultaneously moves closer to a cultural moment before the "empty millennial frenzy."

As his day goes on, Packer appears to understand the shortcomings of financial models as assessments of human behavior. Fittingly, the West Side itself figures as an "unmapped reach" of finance capitalism. The novel reimagines it as ungentrified and anarchic, the site of something primal and lost in prosperous Manhattan.[88] And given that Packer's childhood home is on the far West Side, he too returns to a pre-financial past.

On the way, he encounters iterated tropes: women who bring out his sexual animality, brilliant advisors who encourage him to give up his quantitative methods, and assassinations of indomitable men. For example, Packer realizes he has been wildly attracted to his chief of finance. She appears to be the picture of professional sterility and dedication, but he sees "something lazy, sexy, and insatiable" and declares that she was not born for "Judeo Christian jogging" (49). Like other repeated images, this moment suggest a basic point running through the novel: Packer is uncomfortable in his hyperrational mind and yearns for a different way of seeing. The novel places even more mysterious intrusions into Packer's journey. These seemingly inexplicable phenomena accompany his psychological reorientation, and given Packer's status as the lynchpin of global capitalism, they represent DeLillo's prescription for a culture impoverished by finance's instrumentality.

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[88] Anyone who has been in New York in the last twenty years knows that this is a fantasy, but it is not an empty one. DeLillo began writing about the city in a very different time. Great Jones Street (1973) compares rock star Bucky Wunderlick's chaotic concerts (and their mysterious power over his audiences) with his Lower East Side neighborhood. In Underworld, memories of ethnic neighborhoods in 1950s New York haunt the characters in late 1990s Arizona. See: Don DeLillo, *Great Jones Street* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1973); DeLillo, *Underworld*.

The first intrusion is a pointed allusion to Einstein's Special Theory of Relativity. Packer begins the novel reading Einstein's theory when he cannot sleep. Even though the theory is mentioned only briefly (Packer never explicitly discusses it), its timely appearances give the novel a moral arc. Published in 1905, the Special Theory challenged fundamental principles of classical science, including assumptions about the fixity of time and space. Einstein's theory proved that they exist together in space-time and that no objective measurement could be taken of either, because a person's inertial frame of reference affects his perspective. When his portfolio suffers, Packer's in-house philosopher implicitly recommends that 1990s investors, and the culture they influence, could use an update of Einstein's work: "We need a new theory of time," the advisor insists (86). DeLillo agrees, and the Special Theory figures as an ideal art object that Cosmopolis itself emulates.

In addition to providing an aesthetic and philosophical model, the Special Theory serves a vital function within the novel: it communicates the unspoken logic for the importance of Packer's westward trip. The Special Theory delegitimizes his initial rationalist and materialist worldview, which underpins the finance industry he drives and the postmodern culture that worships him. It thus encourages him to leave his job and find meaning elsewhere. In the later half of the novel, Packer heeds this lesson and embodies DeLillo's Einstein-influenced suggestion for Manhattan and millennial America. He transcends instrumental cognition through an artistic embrace of mystery in Hell's Kitchen.

The novel thus uses Einstein's work in such a way that it fits with DeLillo's high-modernist literary ambitions. The Special Theory stands in for the larger

modernist project as it is inter-disciplinarily conceived by intellectual historian William R. Everdell. Everdell considers modernism in literature, visual art, and science an acceptance of "the collapse of ontological continuity" and an adoption of a "nonlogical, nonobjective" model of the universe (11).[89]

Packer is the type of over-confident rationalist whose worldview the Special Theory problematized. His investing strategy epitomizes his supposed mastery over nature. Packer uses classical mathematics to predict market behavior. For instance, he takes a ratio of a distant star's heat reading and finds that it correlates with certain equities. He also looks for micro-timed trends, mining data in billionths-of-seconds. This quantified, deity-like understanding allows him to trump other investors in outperforming the market. Packer carries this rational egoism into his hobbies. He speaks in a variety of languages and comments authoritatively on arcane topics including bird anatomy and minimalist art. DeLillo thus shows that the culture has accelerated so that the Wall Street alpha-male really does deserve Wolfe's satiric designation, "Master of the Universe." But although Packer outsmarts the market, he and his thought processes are representative of the nation. His micro-timing is mirrored by the masses outside his limousine, who can scan real-time stock tickers and forget about major world events after watching a few televised replays. He becomes a kind of high priest to a society entranced by markets, a role that approximates the modernist artist's.

DeLillo is not content to leave Packer in this exalted position. With his ferocious intellectual curiosity and fascination for the natural world, Packer has the

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[89] William R. Everdell, *The First Moderns: profiles in the origins of twentieth century thought*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 11.

potential for a higher plane of expression. He seeks not just profits, but at a deeper level, the truths of nature. The novel suggests that Packer's sophisticated quantitative methods, for all their apparent power, reflect the finance industry's weakness in observing human behavior: unlike art, finance cannot account for and does not celebrate the inexplicable. It shares the same flaws that Einstein's Special Theory revealed in classical mathematics.

The novel makes this case by frustrating Packer's mastery over nature. It does so by sinking Packer's enormous bet on the Yen. His hedge fund is crushed, and his self-understanding crumbles with it. "The yen [sic] has to drop," he says several times over the course of the novel, but the Yen refuses to follow his logic and continues rising against his bet (46). Rather than accept fallibility and cut his losses, Packer borrows into the void and purchases stocks with Yen he will have to pay back. As the Yen rises, so does his debt—and a plummeting stock market reduces his reserves. All Packer can say: "It charts" (46). The fall of the stocks probably results from his senseless borrowing of Yen: he introduces instability to the market and in that way causes his own destruction.

Therefore, an irrational current underlies his machine-like veneer. His financial failure and his germinating acceptance of the inexplicable in nature are deeply personal: "The yen [sic] spree was releasing Eric from the influence of his neocortex" (115). Like a Shakespearean tragic hero, Packer has the seeds of his own destruction buried inside him. Indeed, DeLillo gives Packer a self-harming streak. Even while still on the East Side and seemingly stuck in his rational mind, he asks to

be shot with a stun gun as a masochistic sex act. The coldly cognitive is a mere part of Packer; his physical characteristics imply other attributes.

The novel physicalizes Packer's emerging humanity with his memorable imperfection, an asymmetrical prostate. The prostate's location—deep inside his body and thus at the figurative center of finance—implies that there is arbitrariness ingrained in Packer and in his industry. Further, the prostate's reproductive function suggests that human fallibility is hereditary and thus unavoidable. Insofar as humanity is genetically-guaranteed not to follow a blueprint, Packer's investment strategy is doomed because it relies on a rational or at least quantifiably predictable model of human behavior.

Packer's fund has a similarly imbedded flaw, this time in the form of a former employee who plays the role of nemesis in Packer's downfall. Richard Sheets spends the day sitting in an abandoned Hell's Kitchen apartment thinking about killing Packer. Selections from his manic, delusional journal are interspersed into the novel. The madman who opposes Packer's hyperrational genius, Sheets considers Packer inhumanly wealthy, powerful, and cold. At the end of the novel, Packer, without a clear explanation, finds himself outside Sheets' window. It seems that the pull of self-destruction has led Packer there. Sheets uses the opportunity to call out his name. After a long, soul-searching conversation, Sheets murders Packer.

Sheets also does the work of novelist as described in DeLillo's essay "The Power of History." DeLillo writes that the historical novel connects a marginal writer and a powerful icon, inviting the writer to obsess over the icon. Like Packer, then,

Sheets is cast as an analogue to the artist. Sheets' backstory also testifies to the commercialization of knowledge and culture: he was a computer science teacher at a community college who left, as he repeats, "to make my million" (56). He appreciates the beauty of currency charts, but, unlike Packer, he also relishes their imperfections.

In Sheets, DeLillo thus creates a character who represents how art is opposed to, and tacitly superior to, commerce. In DeLillo's account of Manhattan in 2000, a defender of autonomous culture can only be degraded. As such, Sheets is a decidedly broken man. He squats in an abandoned building and has neurotic delusions ("I have severe anxieties that my sex organ is receding into my body" (196)). Sheets believes he is undone by the mindlessness of postmodernity: "It's banks and car parks. It's airline tickets in their computers. It's restaurants filled with people talking. It's people signing the merchant copy" (195).

Further countering finance capitalism, Sheets violates the rationalized assumptions about human behavior on which its models rely. In fact, he subverts Packer Capital from within. He makes threats against the company, but Packer's security team cannot track him because he does not own a phone. Just as the Yen and the asymmetrical prostate confound Packer's worldview, Sheets reveals the inherent problem with the security system's assumption that all people will obey consumer capitalist logic and own phones. The novel further connects Sheets to an implication of the Special Theory, that any judgment based on timing is automatically flawed. Packer's model of charting commodities, micro-timing, assumes that human behavior can be tracked across tiny fractions of a second. But Sheets acts as a wrinkle in micro-time, not owning a watch or even knowing the date. He embraces slowness: "I

think of time in other totalities now. I think of my personal time-span set against the vast numerations, the time of the earth, the stars, the incoherent light-years" (60).[90]

Though degraded, Sheets is powerful in that he is the market participant who disrupts Packer's near-perfect predictive model. As a solitary artist who celebrates complexity, a modernist, he trumps the narrowly rational businessman. He and the tropes with which he is associated—the asymmetrical prostate, the Yen, and of course, the Special Theory—reiterate one of literature's classic lessons: do not assume that people will follow any clear design.

The Special Theory and its physicalized exemplars also function as an insightful and prophetic critique of high finance along the same lines that they point to classic literary lessons. DeLillo provides these predictions by grounding the novel in recent developments in the finance industry. Packer runs a hedge fund, an investment vehicle pioneered by George Soros that gained popularity in the 1990s. Unlike the more conventional mutual funds (the type of firm for which Gary works in The Corrections), hedge funds only accept investments over $1 million and, in theory, their investors are not protected by the government against losses. Hedge funds allowed owners of capital to invest with talented managers who often relied on complex quantitative methods to detect and exploit market inefficiencies. This pocket

[90] In "The Power of History," DeLillo valorizes slowness: "The fast-forward nature of the decade is an apt subject for a novelist. But the novel itself, the old, slow water-torture business of invention and doubt and self-correction, may seem to be wearing an expiration date that takes effect tomorrow." The speed of information and its implications for finance and collective memory in the 1990s will return later in the chapter. See: DeLillo, "The Power of History."

of finance thus appeared to invite creative thinking, leading some of its most successful members to think of themselves as artists.[91]

Packer Capital has a real-life analogue in the hedge fund industry, Long Term Capital Management (LTCM), which also suffered spectacular losses and finally closed in 2000. Like Packer's fund, LTCM was founded by brilliant, academically-inclined financiers (including the Nobel Prize winning Myron Scholes) who could not imagine failing. LTCM used new quantitative models, including the trademark Black-Scholes equation for pricing derivatives, that were supposed to generate consistently huge returns. Relying on this model, the fund borrowed eight hundred times more than it had in assets and made a vast array of bets, including a fatal one in which it leveraged the Russian ruble to speculate in Dutch mortgage bonds. Its collapse shook the global financial system.[92]

Since the 2008 crash, a critical consensus has emerged on the industry's failings, and it often includes the charge that LTCM pioneered the kind of thinking that would later upend finance. DeLillo prefigures this critique's defining features with striking specificity, suggesting that high finance and its surrounding culture were too quantitatively-minded, too rigid, too hubristic, and too quick to forget history. Michael Lewis makes this case in his highly regard account of the 2008 credit crisis, The Big Short. Lewis explains that the ubiquity of quantitative thinking across Wall

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[91] An anecdote: Jim Simons is a mathematician recognized as a major contributor to geometry who left the academy to start a hedge fund and now has a net worth estimated at $8.5 billion. At a lecture at NYU in 2007, he was asked what distinguished truly great investment managers. He took great interest in the question and declared, "Imagination." See: Jim Simons, *The Stern Opportunity* lecture, December 10, 2007, http://www.sternopportunity.com/2.12222/december-10-jim-simons-of-renaissance-technologies-llc-1.1610404.

[92] Roger Loewenstein, *When Genius Failed: The Rise and Fall of Long-Term Capital Management* (New York: Random House, 2000); but the fund's collapse did nothing to damper the long-term prospects of the hedge fund industry, which prospered by making "short" bets that the market would struggle and recruiting new investors in the following years of instability.

Street (particularly overconfidence in a few statistical models at investment banks) and the sheer complexity of newly created financial derivatives led to dangerously leveraged bets. Lewis points out that investors who avoided such models were more likely to avoid the crash.[93] Nassim Nicholas Taleb's now-famous theory of the Black Swan makes a related argument: that the industry's increasing reliance on statistical probabilities throughout the 1990s blinded it to unlikely but catastrophic scenarios.[94]

DeLillo's Packer suffers from the shortcomings described by both Lewis and Taleb. In the novel as the Yen rises and thus further defies his expectations, Packer can only instruct his chief of finance, who has a PhD in mathematics, to look for a chart that justifies his prediction. Packer refuses to acknowledge that there are phenomena that simply cannot be accounted for. The Yen's strange course, Sheets' intrusion, and Packer's asymmetrical prostate all constitute inexplicable phenomena whose existence cannot be predicted. Nonetheless, they can bring down any system that neglects them.

DeLillo's account of Packer's downfall is consistent with another major critique of millennial finance. Eminent economist John Kenneth Galbraith's A Short History of Financial Euphoria (1994) identifies psychological causes of financial bubbles across history, and DeLillo's novel applies the theory to contemporary America. Galbraith posits that in order for a bubble to form, the public must collectively forget that past run-ups in asset prices have ended in disaster before investors begin the next inflationary buying spree. Galbraith writes, "There can be

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[93] Michael Lewis, *The Big Short: Inside the Doomsday Machine* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2010).
[94] Nassim Nicholas Taleb, *The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable* (New York: Random House, 2007).

few fields of human endeavor in which history counts for so little as in the world of finance. Past experience, to the extent that it is a part of memory at all, is dismissed as the primitive refuge of those who do not have the insight to appreciate the incredible wonders of the present."[95] It is clear that the elderly Galbraith, an economist who wrote his first seminal book in 1952, found something unique and ominous in the American finance industry of the end of the twentieth century.

In "The Power of History," DeLillo lends a possible reason for Galbraith's alarm about the current moment. DeLillo contends that the sheer speed of information made possible by new technologies in the 1990s serves an impulse to forget: "The microwave, the VCR remote, the telephone redial button and other time-collapsing devices may make us feel that our ordinary household technology reflects something that flows through the deep mind of the culture, an impatient craving for time itself to move faster."[96] Cosmopolis shows how such high-technology and media saturation accelerate forgetting. In one scene, Packer contemplates cable news replays of the murder of Arthur Rapp, the managing director of the IMF, who, in an event foreshadowing the novel's conclusion, is killed at a news conference by a terrorist. Because it is endlessly reproduced on a video loop, the foreboding nature of the event has little effect on Packer: "He knew they would [continue replays] into the night, our night, until the sensation drained out of it or everyone in the world had seen it, whichever came first" (34). Rapp's murder should convince Packer to take his security team's advice, but he continues having meetings in his limousine.

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[95] John Kenneth Galbraith, *A Short History of Financial Euphoria* (New York: Penguin, 1990), 13.
[96] DeLillo, "The Power of History."

As Packer confronts mounting evidence that his model for the Yen is imperfect, he heads farther west. In the process, both he and the novel find deeper language that transcends finance's rationalism. His redemption is neither explicit nor unequivocal—it is rather appropriately mysterious. For DeLillo, art does not provide objective truth or the lofty remove of "sweetness and light." Instead, it allows people to access primordial humanity, collective feeling, and mystery. These qualities, the novel proposes, have been stifled by late capitalism's intrusion into culture and more specifically, finance's rigid perception of human behavior. DeLillo's aesthetic ideal is thus perhaps best embodied by the visceral nature of music or the visual arts, which he references frequently in Cosmopolis and other works.[97] As Packer travels west to Hell's Kitchen, he is reacquainted with own primal nature and the wonder of group participation, the subjects DeLillo prizes across his novels.

Packer has four experiences with art when he is in Manhattan's West Side, and he more fully realizes his humanity with each one. After crossing Broadway, he enters a theater with a massive, drug-fuelled party. A banner announces that it is "THE LAST TECHNO-RAVE" (125). This phrase could just as easily describe DeLillo's New York, which is at once filled with images of technological utopianism and verging on anarchy. Packer's bodyguard cannot understand what would make

[97] Great Jones Street, even as it satirizes the corporatization of music, delights in the sheer power that a rock star has in unloosing wildness in his audience. With DeLillo's interest in the transcendent and mysterious power of art in mind, Amy Hungerford argues that such scenes in his work attempt to create a literary version of a Latin Mass. The novelist's language, like the priest's, endows an entranced audience with dignity and redemption. Packer operates in the same vein. Though a financier, he is doubled as an artist, and he serves as a high priest to New York. The novel's depiction of a frenzied and empty city, however, reveals why Packer is not an adequate replacement for genuine spiritual leadership. See: DeLillo, *Great Jones Street*; Amy Hungerford, "Don DeLillo's Latin Mass," *Contemporary Literature* 43, no. 3 (2006): 343-380, http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/contemporary_literature/v047/47.3hungerford.html.

young people take a dissociative drug and form swaying hives, but Packer does: "There's pain enough for everybody now" (125). Their conversation suggests that Packer has come to understand that the postmodern culture he epitomizes is spiritually deficient. Simply by bringing people together for a Dionysian musical experience, the rave gives more nourishment for the soul than watching stock tickers while talking on a cell phone.[98] The techno-rave thus primes Packer for his second aesthetic experience.

En route to Ninth Avenue, Packer happens upon the funeral of his friend and favorite rapper, Brutha Fez. The novel describes Brutha Fez's music as a melding of Sufi mysticism and gangster rap that spoke to a diverse audience. With a style described as "anti-matter rap," Fez is also obliquely connected to the Special Theory (137). Looking at the emotional, massive crowd at the funeral, Packer comes to a realization: that artists have indescribable influences long after their deaths, while businessmen simply die: "It was dispiriting, then, to think about the collection of mourners. Here was a spectacle he clearly could not command. And the funeral wasn't yet over" (136). The rap artist's funeral appears to allude to Notorious B.I.G.'s legendary procession in Brooklyn in 1995. The event combines genuine spiritual delirium and media spectacle. Brutha Fez's manager observes that the funeral will help his late client's legacy.[99] But, as at B.I.G.'s funeral, the spontaneous outpouring of grief from a huge, emotionally moved crowd appears to have grown organically, from outside the rationalizing logic of the market.

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[98] The next chapter will detail Wallace's fascination with drugs.

[99] The manager actually turns out to be a friend of Packer's. In fact, he is the only person Packer easily relates to as a peer. This relationship intimates an affinity between the finance industry and the corporate commercialization of culture—a latent but vital theme in Cosmopolis.

Packer's immersion in DeLillo's program for aesthetic education culminates when he finds an elaborate movie shoot in which a crowd of hundreds has taken off its clothes to lie down in the middle of an intersection. Stripping off his own clothes to join the anonymous crowd, Packer finally participates in an artistic mass spectacle like the rave and funeral and immerses himself in mystery and human imperfection.

> He wanted to be here among them, all-body, the tattooed, the hairy-assed, those who stank. He wanted to set himself in the middle of the intersection, among the old with their raised veins and body blotches and next to the dwarf with a bump on his head. He thought there were probably people here with wasting diseases, a few, undisuadable, skin flaking away…He was one of them. He was one of the morbidly obese" (176).

In an inspired detail, the financing for the film has collapsed: "Happened in seconds apparently. Money all gone" (175). Presumably, Packer either funded the film directly or his firm's collapse ruined its investors. The filming therefore happens outside of the late capitalist commercial economy, making Packer's aesthetic immersion more authentic. The film set, like the preceding rave and funeral, provides more than glimpses of an apocalypse brought by a narcissistic financial elite. More subtly, it represents an aesthetic realm that DeLillo suggests is an alternative to the pernicious combination of rationalism and hollowness that the industry has unloaded on New York.

Packer, now in tune with the novel's teaching, forgoes his individual power and allows himself to be caught up in the collective spirit. In the process, he finds wonder in and accepts the beauty of human imperfection. While he starts off confounded by his asymmetrical prostate, now, he celebrates the lesson that people do not fit the designs of his quantified investing or technocratic rationalism. Like

America in the final pages of The Corrections, Packer finds moral redemption only once he has lost his money.

In the final scenes, Packer abandons his limousine and demonstrates his new humanity by sitting down for a conversation with Sheets, his novelistically-inclined murderer. Packer, albeit harshly, admits to his lack of sympathy: he gives no money to charities and pays no attention to his employees. He also comes clean about his self-destructiveness, admitting that he decided to ruin his fund and thus wreak global havoc once he realized he could not figure out the Yen (190). With Sheets' prodding, Packer can appreciate his own irrationality.

The novel ties together Packer's evolution in his dying moments. After Sheets has shot him, Packer looks at his supposedly real-time camera watch. The final sentence is: "He is dead inside the crystal of his watch but still alive in original space, waiting for the shot to sound" (209). The tragedy of the novel's critique of the "techno-rave" 1990s is encapsulated in this image: technology has dislocated Packer so much from his real, corporeal experience that he can only recognize his pain when he sees it on a screen. Perhaps the human need to feel at all costs motivates his maximalist self-destructive campaign. This ending also instantiates the Special Theory's deflation of Packer's persona. Packer sees that he is dead in one frame of reference and alive in another. Thus, in his final moment, Packer is forced to recognize that the timing of events is subjective. And Packer, as titanic he is, only exists depending on one's perspective.

With a program for cultural education so robust that it can trump the market, DeLillo's novel contends with the same range of issues as Ellis's but comes to starkly different conclusions. A return to American Psycho can thus point out the boldness of DeLillo's ambitions. And with Cosmopolis as a point of comparison, the outlook underlying Ellis's gruesome novel begins to take shape. Now a film and a cult classic in its own right, American Psycho is the first-person story of Patrick Bateman. He works for an investment bank, studies high-end consumer products, and savagely rapes and murders women and a few men. But the title, American Psycho, insists that Bateman is an American—one representative, in an absurd way, of a cultural moment. In Bateman, Ellis creates a Gothic-horrific parody of a young man working in finance in the late 1980s. He has tastes typical of his world: Dolby Digital speakers, thin cocktail waitresses, bone business cards with raised type, and uncut cocaine. The novel's depiction of a split New York—a privileged sphere for Bateman and his friends, and an underworld of homeless people from whom Bateman occasionally takes victims for sport—is exaggerated, but it is in accordance with the contrasting fates of the yuppie elite and the city's poorest residents in the late 1980s.

As if conventional literature cannot apprehend the horrors of the era, the novel's violence, format, and narration—all extremely jarring—actually serve to make a more extreme version of the cultural criticism in Cosmopolis. Like Packer, Bateman is displaced from himself, describing his surroundings as "the geography around which my reality revolved."[100] Perhaps these characters, to whom the novels are fanatically devoted, cannot recognize themselves because their creators do not consider them human. As beneficiaries of finance capitalism without regard for

[100] Ellis, *American Psycho*, 375.

cultural authority, Bateman and Packer are part of a species threatening to literary novelists, whose prominence had been gutted by the collapse of the post-war liberal order and electronic democracy.

As economic histories, both novels are concerned with rising income inequality and the birth of finance's untouchable class. But American Psycho takes this indictment to a ridiculous extreme: Bateman can murder at will, and no one cares. A taxi driver claims to recognize Bateman from a wanted poster and yells at him for killing another driver. This recognition would constitute a glimmer of salvation, because at least one person in the amoral desert would be upholding justice. But as the graffiti that opens the novel indicates ("ABANDON ALL HOPE YE WHO ENTER HERE"), there is no redemption in Ellis's New York, and the driver actually just wants to rob him.[101] In contrast, Sheets, who figures as a novelist, calls Packer to account for his selfishness in the conclusion of Cosmopolis. DeLillo's New York is not so grim as Ellis's, and literature continues to flicker with moral righteousness.

By contrast, art's inability to pacify culture punctuates the bleak ending of American Psycho. Bateman poignantly narrates the feelings underlying his sociopathy: "My pain is constant and sharp and I do not hope for a better world for anyone."[102] Although he acknowledges that he is speaking to an audience, the supposedly therapeutic act of writing yields no reprieve: "Even after admitting this…and coming face-to-face with these truths, there is no catharsis. I gain no deeper knowledge about myself, no new understanding can be extracted from my telling. There has been no reason for me to tell you any of this. This confession has meant

[101] Ibid., 1.
[102] Ibid., 377.

nothing."[103] Bateman is asked to name the saddest song he can think of. Though he has an encyclopedic memory for 1980s music and designer clothing, he answers, "'You Can't Always Get What You Want' by the Beatles."[104]

This mangling of a cultural touchstone encapsulates much of what Franzen and DeLillo find wrong with America. With the concept of the Ache, Franzen argues that Americans in the 1990s no longer had to accept The Rolling Stones' lesson, that people cannot immediately gratify their desires. For Franzen, learning to cope with this reality builds character. The significant shift between 1968 and 1988 also echoes Jameson's vision, that late capitalism birthed a radically different era of postmodernity within that time. Bateman's sociopathy can be interpreted as a result of his never being denied anything. And his broader society has done nothing to help. Corporate logic has rendered its traditional sources of authority obsolete.

Bateman also lacks another source of authority important to Franzen, family. Bateman's father owns the company he works for, and he appears to have an unlimited inheritance. But he has zero contact with his parents, and given that he began harming women while attending boarding school, they implicitly have been absent for much of his life. He speaks with his brother briefly because an estate lawyer organizes a meeting, thereby implying a connection between his family's wealth to its moral disintegration. Bateman, and by proxy the class he outlandishly represents, is a man without parents, a child who has yet to work out Oedipal difficulties.

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[103] Ibid.
[104] Ibid., 371.

This Oedipal theme brings American Psycho in sync with Cosmopolis. As Packer travels westward, he moves closer to his childhood home, and the reader discovers that his father died when he was four. The death forced him into a close, peer-to-peer style relationship with his overwrought mother. Once this history is unearthed, Packer has a series of scattered thoughts about his mother having a boyfriend. He reveals deep psychic wounds: "I know what went on between them. I'm thinking is his picture in a frame or on her dresser. How many times do two people have to fuck before one of them deserves to die?" (186). Here, the self-made, controlled Packer closely resembles the aristocratic, axe-murdering Bateman, and the seemingly different novels find the same pain and immaturity at the heart of the boom in the 1990s. But DeLillo imagines that the powers of art and collective humanity can fix his man of finance. After all, though he can never meet his father, Packer finds redemption in his old neighborhood. Ellis's Bateman, however, is left without an exit.

3. Addicts in Infinite Jest

In his essay "Certainly the End of *Something* or Other, One Would Sort of Have to Think," David Foster Wallace lampoons the self-indulgence of John Updike's novel Toward The End of Time (1997). Wallace, echoing other critics, links Updike with Mailer, Roth, and Bukowski in the slightly derisive category the Great Male Narcissists, or the G.M.N.'s. Wallace insists Updike's central failure is characteristic of this group. He alleges that, despite their differences and personal animosities, all of these writers think that "getting to have sex with whomever one wants whenever one wants is a cure for human despair." Wallace adds, "It never occurs to [Updike's stand-in protagonist], though, that the reason he's so unhappy is that he's an asshole."[105]

Two of Wallace's ambitions are embedded in this *ad hominem* nastiness. Though his tone would indicate otherwise, Wallace actually admires the G.M.N.'s, whose work, like his, is ambitious, self-referential, and concerned with the emotional suffering of otherwise privileged white men. Nonetheless, he wants to define himself against them and reroute American fiction away from their influence in a new, more avowedly political and sensitive direction. Second, though it is not immediately apparent in the above quote, Wallace wishes to critique Updike for his adherence to the logic of the commodity. Updike's literature of self-indulgence and celebration of acquisitive promiscuity are, on Wallace's account, consistent with the attitudes of the consumer economy.

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[105] David Foster Wallace, "Certainly the End of *Something* or Other, One Would Sort of Have to Think," in *Consider The Lobster* (New York: Little, Brown and Co., Hachette Book Group, 2005), 37.

Unlike the other authors studied in this thesis, Wallace looks at economic change in the 1990s and emphasizes the expanding consumer economy rather than the financial elite. His writing returns obsessively to a belief that he considers dominant in American culture: that obtaining a good (or experience) can solve a purchaser's immediate emotional needs. He suggests that such consumerism obviates genuine individual growth and leads to a uniquely American social disease. Or, in short, consumerism ultimately leaves us depressed.

Fittingly, Wallace considers one facet of capitalism, corporate marketing, to be the decade's defining force. He argues that marketing exerts ubiquitous influence on American culture and Americans' inner-lives. Wallace's aversion to marketing is evident in a figure in his non-fiction, the corporate-style demographer who uses polling to pander to glib satisfactions and thus debases young Americans.

In his essay "E Unibus Pluram," the most expansive of his critiques of contemporary America, Wallace paranoiacally obsesses over the corporatization of the culture industry. He paints demographers who work for television networks as omniscient definers of popular taste, and he charges them with fostering a destructive ethic of irony in American youth culture.[106] What is lost in this omnipresence of irony, Wallace believes, is the compassion that forges communities. He writes: "TV's self-mocking invitation to itself as indulgence, transgression, a glorious 'giving in' (not foreign to addictive cycles) is one of two ways it's consolidated its six-hour hold on my generation's cajones. The other is postmodern irony."[107] In "Up, Simba!" his

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[106] Wallace, "E Unibus Pluram," 151.

[107] Wallace, "E Unibus Pluram," 165; Wallace's rhetoric emulates a conversation in which he speaks directly to the reader and guides him through cognitive shifts to reveal the impoverishment of his culture. This style also subverts irony, because it feels as if Wallace is sitting in front of the reader and

gonzo journalistic account of John McCain's bid for the Republican nomination in 2000, Wallace applies similar logic in blaming campaigns that use market demography for the decline of American politics. He suggests that George W. Bush calculated that he should engage in an ugly campaign in order to turn off youth voters from the political process entirely, because they were more likely to vote for his opponent.[108]

In his two collections of non-fiction and other essays, Wallace applies the same constellation of ideas to an eclectic range of events in consumer culture: the pornography industry's annual awards, a cruise, a lobster festival, the filming of big-budget movies, and a Canadian professional tennis tournament. These digressive essays consistently return to the insidious ways their organizers dehumanize the participants. In *N*+1, Chad Harbach locates the germ of Wallace's interest: "[Wallace] is fascinated by the way corporations use psychological cunning and sophisticated observation to discover their constituents' most basic needs and fears, to find the salient detail that will grant them access to a soul."[109]

Wallace's major novel, the sprawling Infinite Jest (1996), is his fullest and most creative treatment of American consumerism. It is a 1990s parable that

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desperately trying to get him to go against the grain of postmodern cynicism. The thesis of "E Unibus Pluram" is a specimen example of his prose: "It's going to take a while, but I'm going to prove to you that the nexus where U.S. TV and fiction converse and consort is self-conscious irony." Wallace gut-level aversion to the Barthesian notion of the dead author is also in keeping with desire to converse organically and passionately with the reader on a person-to-person level. See: Wallace, "E Unibus Pluram," 161; David Foster Wallace, "Greatly Exaggerated," in *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again* (New York: Little, Brown and Co., 1997), 170.

[108] David Foster Wallace, "Up, Simba!" in *Consider The Lobster* (New York: Little, Brown and Co., Hachette Book Group, 2005), 37.

[109] Chad Harbach, "David Foster Wallace! *Oblivion, Infinite Jest*," *N+1* 1, (2004), http://nplusonemag.com/david-foster-wallace.

chronicles a panorama of cultural disintegration and its market-based causes. Most of the novel takes place in the near-future (approximately 2008) in a dystopian contemporary America that resembles our own but has also suffered drastic decay. The novel thus extrapolates from the late twentieth century's embrace of marketing and predicts where the economy will lead the nation in the coming decade. Its prophecy is unambiguously bleak, as the huge, diverse cast of characters and their larger society are in shambles. In Wallace's future world, America has responded to the ruin of its own territory by annexing huge swaths of Canada and Mexico. What was the United States is now the Organization for North American States, or O.N.A.N—a name that mocks consumerism's self-destructive gorging.

Wallace's novel, unlike the others studied in this thesis, is simply too "fractured" to account for its entire design.[110] Its 981 pages of narrative are followed by 198 pages of "Notes and Errata" in brutally small print, much of which emulates the glossary to a pharmacology textbook. The main text itself switches between settings, points of view, and styles, and the entire narrative is delivered in a baroquely complex method and in exaggerated, parodic prose. ("Pemulis shouts across that that's so totally beside the point it doesn't matter, that the reason players aren't explicitly exempted in ESCHAX.DIR is that their exemption is what makes Eschaton and its axioms fucking possible in the *first* place" (338).)[111] Several hundred pages into the novel, the reader has no sense that the end is near, and even in the conclusion, virtually nothing has been resolved. Nonetheless, a rough sketch of its major features

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[110] This is Wallace's own language from an interview in which he stated that reality is "fractured" and so too must be the text. See: Wallace, *ZDF Mediathek*.

[111] Wallace, David Foster. *Infinite Jest* First Paperback Edition (New York: Little, Brown and Co., 1996). All subsequent citations from the text in this chapter will be in parentheses.

reveals that Wallace's 'fracturing' of the text is in the service of a dark vision of contemporary America as an ungraspable, incoherent carnival of excess.[112]

Although they are surrounded by many minor characters and events, there are two primary settings and two main casts of characters. These primary settings, located next to each other in suburban Boston, are symbolically linked: they are live-in facilities designed for distinct groups, and they are microcosms of the novel's vision of 1990s America. One is Ennet House, a gritty addiction treatment center. Several of its residents are profiled in great detail, which pushes the underside of consumerism and the ugliness at the margins of prosperous America to the forefront of the novel. The main character at Ennet House is Don Gately, a former high school football star from a broken home who takes up his mother's habit and becomes an oral narcotics addict. Gately heroically redeems himself by sticking to sobriety and thus, in Wallace's moral calculus, rejects the seductive logic of the commodity in its crudest form.

The other main setting is Enfield Academy, a boarding school for promising junior tennis players.[113] The discipline imposed on these young people, their rigorous schooling and athletic training, rivals that of Ennet House's mandatory chores and meetings and its zero-tolerance policy on relapsing. The students also wrestle with the nascent versions of the same psychological issues—depression, self-consciousness, anxiety—that plague the addicts next door. The main characters are the Incandenza

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[112] The idea of a depraved nation runs through his essay on the pornography industry's annual awards, in which he compares pornography to Hollywood films, and by extension considers America a thinly veiled hedonistic society. See: David Foster Wallace, "Big Red Son" in *Consider The Lobster* (New York: Little, Brown and Co., Hachette Book Group, 2005).

[113] Wallace, once a regionally-ranked junior player himself who had a winning record on the team at Amherst, wrote frequently about tennis. It is perhaps the one subject for which he had uncompromised adulation.

family, a tragically self-destructive clan who allude to Dostoyevsky's Karamazovs in various ways. Patriarch J.O. Incandeza, a former scientist turned avant-garde filmmaker who founded the academy, has enrolled his three sons in the institution, and portraits of their demons and addictions take up much of the novel. The family's demise is exemplified by the breakdown of its middle son, Hal, who strives to be a good friend and brother but develops a drug problem and finally has a psychotic episode on a college visit.

There is almost no contact between the characters at the publicly-funded halfway house and the upscale tennis academy, a separation which illustrates the economic gulf in America that began opening in the early 1970s with the collapse of the post-war liberal order and widened in the 1990s. Nonetheless, along with many other locations and characters, these settings are linked by the macguffin that gives the novel its title—a wildly addictive videotape alternatively called the "samizdat," "The Entertainment," and "*Infinite Jest V*." The videotape, which was originally created by J.O. Incandenza, circulates among the novel's colorful cast of minor characters, which includes radical Quebecois separatists, bookies, graduate students of film, corporations, and various other groups, all of whom want to take advantage of the video's power to immobilize anyone who watches it. By the end of the novel, Ennet House and Enfield Academy residents are, for the most part unknowingly, caught in the crossfire of the battle to obtain the master copy of the tape.

Despite its complex form, the novel has a central, uniting concern epitomized by the video. The addictive logic of the commodity brings together the anarchic

representation of America. The novel's diverse characters fail in their various life projects for the same underlying reason: they believe that paying for goods and experiences will solve their emotional problems. This recourse-to-purchasing means that they never plumb the depths of their depressions and instead become addicted to quick-fix solutions. With inventive satire, Wallace calls attention to how the addictive logic of the commodity has become America's organizing principle. The new O.N.A.N. government has auctioned off time itself to the highest bidder, ending A.D. and beginning Subsidized Time (S.T.) in approximately 2004. The novel ends in the "Year of Glad," and most of it takes place during the "Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment." This setting underscores the extent of the commercialization of American life. It also implies, in keeping with the other works studied in this thesis, that not even the adult characters are mature, and thus that economic prosperity has created a culture that arrests development.

Though Infinite Jest is certainly chaotic, it is in dialogue with the other works discussed in this thesis. The novel's assessment of contemporary America is remarkably similar to Franzen's in his essay "Perchance to Dream." Franzen submits that consumerism exacerbates the basic human problems, or the "Ache," it purports to solve. A similar view is apparent throughout Wallace's work. The authors agree that easy access to commodities has stunted personal development. It should be noted that the two shared a close friendship. Wallace was staying on Franzen's couch in New

York while editing Infinite Jest, so it is hardly surprising that Wallace's novel shares Franzen's outlook. [114]

Nonetheless, their views are not identical. Franzen notes that the "historically preferred methods" of "coming to terms with "the Ache" are "art and religion." The second "method," religion, is not meaningful in either novelist's depiction of America.[115] But the writers differ on art's status. The Corrections testifies to Franzen's insistence that art remains a viable method of coping with psychic pain and of providing moral guidance to an otherwise disorderly society. Morally admirable characters in Franzen's novel also just so happen to be dedicated readers (e.g. Alfred and Denise). But there are no such readers in Infinite Jest. Hal Incandenza, arguably the novel's richest character, reads widely, but his obsession with grammar and arcane academic topics seem to preclude a heartfelt connection to literature.[116] In contrast to Franzen, Wallace therefore implies that art no longer provides an antidote to the market.

The relationship between Infinite Jest and The Corrections can be further explained by juxtaposition to the one made in chapter two between Ellis's American

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[114] Wallace reiterates this position in his television interview: "A lot of things in Infinite Jest have to do with an American idea and not a universal one but one that I think kids get exposed to very early: that you are the most important and what you want is the most important and that your job in life is to gratify your desires…This is certainly the ideology of television and advertising" The cross-fertilization between the authors will be a theme of this chapter. See: Wallace, *ZDF Mediathek.*

[115] Along with Wallace, Franzen appears to think that religious belief no longer has the power to provide genuine spiritual sustenance. In The Corrections, the loathsome Meisners exhibit self-righteous Christianity, and no other characters even allude to their faiths. In Infinite Jest, the loss of religion is explicit in the end of Christ-structured time. Religion also is lampooned in Wallace's first and only other finished novel The Broom of The System (1987), in which a televangelist takes credit for and tries to profit from a parrot's remarkable linguistic ability. See: David Foster Wallace, *The Broom of The System* (New York: Viking Press, 1987).

[116] Hal's lack of personal connection with literature is evident in the titles of his papers, which include *Neoclassical Assumptions in Contemporary Prescriptive Grammar* and *Tertiary Symbolism in Justinian Erotica*. These are so patently academic that, like Franzen's satire of Chip's writings, they point to a lack of humanistic engagement.

Psycho and DeLillo's Cosmopolis. Ellis's novel takes one representative of New York's finance elite, and, with its nightmarish circularity, shows that Bateman cannot escape his context. DeLillo reworks Ellis's novel by constructing a linear narrative in which Packer, also a man of Wall Street, finds an aesthetic solution to his society's narrowness of purpose.

Similarly, in The Corrections, Franzen implicitly responds to Infinite Jest by reworking Wallace's dark and chaotic vision into a clearer, more hopeful narrative.[117] The Corrections resembles Infinite Jest in that it provides a panoramic account of society out of control. But the denoument of The Corrections is an optimistic reimagining of Wallace's ending. Franzen implies that a market correction, and some old-fashioned paternalism, can quell America's cultural anarchy. Wallace's novel has no such optimistic conclusion. Towards the end of the narrative, Quebecois separatists obtain a copy of the dangerous *Infinite Jest V* and hatch a plan to attack Enfield Academy. They believe J.O. Incandenza's family must have a reproducible master version that can be used to overthrow the O.N.A.N. government, and they are last seen nearing the academy with vengeance in mind. So while The Corrections ends with a familial reconnection, Infinite Jest finishes with chaos. Further, the middle-class family at the heart of Infinite Jest, the Incandenzas, makes for a significant contrast with Franzen's Lamberts. While Alfred Lambert's nightly trips to his basement laboratory are clues to his honorable work ethic, J.O. Incandenza's optics experiments culminate in the destructive *Infinite Jest V*. The Lamberts' middle son, Chip, refashions himself from a laughably immature sybarite at the start of The

[117] Harbach, without citation, writes that Franzen considered "[Wallace] 'as his "main rival,'" and said that Infinite Jest 'got me working, the way that competition will get you working." See: Harbach, *David Foster Wallace!*.

Corrections into a respectable member of the Midwestern bourgeoisie by the end. But in Wallace's novel, middle son Hal Incandenza's story arc finishes with a psychotic episode. The patriarchs diverge as well. Alfred Lambert, depressed and possibly attempting suicide, falls off a cruise ship but miraculously survives the accident. But J.O. Incandenza, in the most gruesome scene in Infinite Jest, kills himself by microwaving his head in the family kitchen.

As in American Psycho, moreover, the bizarre, non-linear format of Infinite Jest underscores its bleak assessment: that American social reality is broken and has no hope for improvement. Just as the serially repeating episodes of American Psycho emphasize Bateman's imprisonment in his own sociopathic/arch-consumerist mind, the circularity, fracturing, and overall schizophrenia of Infinite Jest mimics the psychology of an addict. Wallace thus creates a reading experience that reinforces his message on a visceral level: his novel immerses the reader in the addicted madness that he believes will be imposed on America by the consumer economy in the coming decade.

With a drug-like video as its uniting object and an elaborate comparison between a school and a halfway house, the basic project of Infinite Jest seems to be applying the shattered atmosphere of a drug rehabilitation center to supposedly more tame realms of contemporary American life. But for this implication to be convincing, the novel needs a tacit explanation for how and why the addictive logic of the commodity will continue to spread among and ensnare Americans.

The novel finds its answer in the burgeoning entertainment and mass media industries, whose offerings have seemingly unlimited reach. Their products function like Big Pharma's opiate painkillers in legally enticing, addicting, and incapacitating the population.[118] This connection between drugs and entertainment is also explicit in "E Unibus Pluram," in which Wallace describes TV, "both medicine and poison," as "the disseminator and definer of the cultural atmosphere we breathe and process."[119] Combining addictive commodities and the ubiquity of televisual culture, Infinite Jest dramatizes Wallace's worst fears. Marketing executives with powerful entertainment have access to the upper-levels of government, and they work together to hypnotize the nation for their own gain. O.N.A.N.'s Chief of Unspecific Services takes a meeting with Glad's Chief of Product Perception and declares, "The upcoming year's Glad's year, Buster. You wanted the year. You want the Year of Glad to be the year half the nation stopped doing anything but staring bug-eyed at some sinister cartridge while little whorls went around in their eyes until they died of starvation in the middle of their own exc---?" (878). This quote's insinuation—that Glad and O.N.A.N. have both been involved in disseminating *Infinite Jest V* and thus trying to control an already degraded public—accentuates the videotape's status as the apotheosis of a destructive commercial product in an ungoverned society.

This conspiratorial narrative emphasizes Wallace's main point, but more subtly, the content of *Infinite Jest V* reveals why he believes the mélange of

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[118] In his non-fiction, Wallace is fascinated by the sheer size of the film industry. He gawks at the expensive special effects in *Terminator 2* and *Jurassic Park*, and even at the multi-billion dollar revenues of the pre-Internet pornography business. These essays betray his resentment towards electronic democracy—in which the novel had to compete for the public's attention with other, more technologically-advanced media. See: David Foster Wallace, "F/X Porn," *Waterstone's Magazine*, Winter/Spring 1998, http://www.badgerinternet.com/bobkat/waterstone.html.

[119] Wallace, "E Unibus Pluram," 154-55.

corporations, marketing, and addictive entertainment is so successful: it appeals to and perpetuates the infantilization of Americans. *Infinite Jest V* consists solely of the "Prettiest Girl of All Time" preparing to pick up her baby to breast feed it. The video is shot so that the viewer has the sensation of being in basinet. That this video is more addictive than any legal or illegal substance reinforces Wallace's position and a view shared by the other novels discussed in this thesis: a lack of spiritual and moral development, or the stuff that makes good adults, underlies America in the 1990s. Relatedly, the videotape reveals what the novel believes is at the heart of the American need to consume: a lack of nurturing and parenting. There is not a single functioning parent-child relationship in the novel.[120] *Infinite Jest V* and those who wish to wield it to their own ends are taking advantage of a helpless public.

Given this scathing portrait, it is only natural that Wallace is intent to separate his own novel, Infinite Jest, from *Infinite Jest V* and the entire consumer economy it epitomizes. He makes the distinction apparent enough on the surface: Infinite Jest is a complex and long novel that requires attention, while *Infinite Jest V*, a sequel to J.O. Incandeza's "first attempt at commercial entertainment," is a simple, short film that appeals to infantile sexual desires and is impossible to turn off.[121]

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[120] Gately's mother tries to be loving, but as the end of the chapter will demonstrate, she is too ravaged by alcoholism to care for her son. The Incandenzas' mother, Avril, makes a show of caring about her children but actually controls them using laughably cheap reverse psychology of the I'm-leaving-the-room-so-you-don't-feel-pressure-to-make-the-decision-I-want-you-to variety in almost all of her infrequent appearances.

[121] For Wallace, it is also important that *Infinite Jest V* is a sequel. He criticizes the concept of the sequel as essentially commercial and reflective of Hollywood's worst instincts in the 1990s, and he applies that criticism to *Terminator 2*. See: Wallace, "F/X Porn."

The ideas informing this distinction are clearly expressed in Wallace's essay on Hollywood filmmaking, "David Lynch Keeps His Head." Echoing the Adornian view of mass culture, he writes:

> A commercial movie doesn't try to wake people up but rather to make their sleep so comfortable and their dreams so pleasant that they will fork over money to experience it—this seduction, a fantasy-for-money transaction, is a commercial movie's basic point. An art film's point is usually more intellectual or aesthetic, and you usually have to do some interpretive work to get it.[122]

This rhetoric is patently self-congratulatory. The definition of "commercial movie," with its registers of drugging and manipulation, describes *Infinite Jest V* and its addictive potential. The flattering definition of "art film" can be applied to the novel Infinite Jest, which, to say the least, takes "some interpretive work to get." Because it is implicitly not addictive or commercial, Infinite Jest is thus valorized in its comparison with *Infinite Jest V*.

But as many commentators in various contexts have pointed out, the line between art and commerce disintegrated leading up to the 1990s. Art historian Paul Wood, influenced by Jameson and Orwell, has argued that in the late twentieth century, creative production was "well and truly inside the whale" of late capitalism," frustrating any attempt at the Adornian avant-garde.[123] Wallace, both in his essays and in his fiction, is acutely aware that he cannot avoid this subsumption. For example, he accepted freelance writing assignments for major publications. His work from under the corporate umbrella testifies to his limitless anxiety on the subject. In the end of the Lynch essay, written for the movie industry promotion vehicle

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[122] David Foster Wallace, "David Lynch Keeps His Head," in *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again* (New York: Little, Brown and Co., 1997), 170.
[123] Paul Wood, "Inside the whale: an introduction to postmodernist art," in *Theories in Contemporary Art*, eds. Gil Perry and Paul Wood, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 39.

Premiere, Wallace accuses the magazine of taking part in a meaningless echo chamber that perpetuates the popularity of bad action movies and neglects more worthy art films.[124] Wallace acted without regard to the basic missions and standards of other publications as well: he handed an editor at *Rolling Stone* a piece that would have taken up the entire magazine, and he lampooned food culture in *Gourmet*.[125] Nonetheless, though Wallace was not one of the decade's true commercial superstars, his bad manners and contravening of stylistic norms of journalism and literary fiction had little effect: magazines printed his work and asked for more, publishers released and promoted his novels, and readers bought them.

Infinite Jest, which was to be Wallace's crowning achievement, raised the stakes of this issue at the intersection of his art, his career, and his era. His work necessarily participated in the commercial nexus it critiqued, and the novel, no matter how ambitious, was no exception. Wallace was writing for Little, Brown, at the time a part of the Time Warner communications empire. He also took part in a broader commercially successful vogue for oversized postmodernist novels.[126] Addressing the novel's status vis-à-vis the consumer economy thus became a vital task that pushed Wallace to his creative limits. He adopts a tactic that literary scholar James F. English identifies as common among writers wrestling with the corporate branding of their novels: "to become more self-conscious about their dependent independency and to

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[124] Wallace, "David Lynch," 212.
[125] Wallace, "Up, Simba!" and "Consider the Lobster" in *Consider The Lobster* (New York: Little, Brown and Co., Hachette Book Group, 2005).
[126] Infinite Jest benefited from these ties to the corporate world: it reached several national bestseller lists.

develop new, more ambiguous strategies or styles of play."[127] Wallace appears desperate to assert his artistic autonomy while fully cognizant of its impossibility.

While aware the task is ultimately impossible, Wallace goes to great lengths to distinguish his novel from the eponymous video contained in it. As an object, Infinite Jest is designed to elude commodification. Its sheer size and complexity resist commercial packaging; one might say that Wallace felt as if adding to his novel moved it further from commercial status. Unlike most entertainment (e.g. TV, commercial paperbacks), it is too cumbersome to experience lying down.[128] The time it takes to finish the novel means that the reader must keep it longer than most disposable goods. Further, the text's complexity requires real intellectual labor, and its lack of resolution and emphasis on the grittier side of a prosperous decade hardly appeal to base instincts or invite readers to seek out similar novels.[129]

The very inclusion of *Infinite Jest V* within Infinite Jest, like the parallel placement of Corecktall within The Corrections, exemplifies another anxious use of the tactic described by English. The addictive video within Wallace's novel implies that late capitalism is so insidious that it replicates itself even inside avowedly avant-garde art. In Infinite Jest, the search undertaken by several violent groups for the master copy of *Infinite Jest V*, though it is unresolved in the fractured narrative, seems to threaten the safety of the central characters by the end of the novel. Franzen's vision is comparatively sanguine: Corecktall, whose continual reappearances in The

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[127] James F. English, "Winning the Culture Game: Prizes, Awards, and the Rules of Art," *New Literary History* 33. (2002): 111-12, Project MUSE.

[128] Wallace's tactic—to write a novel so cumbersome that it would resist commercial packaging—has an analogue in the visual arts. Large-scale installations pieces of the 1990s were designed to elude mercenary dealers whose clients were unaccustomed to and had more difficulty displaying such works.

[129] In its enormity, however, Infinite Jest does resemble another facet of Wallace's definition of a Hollywood film: "Movies are an authoritarian medium. They vulnerabilize and then dominate you." See: Wallace, "David Lynch," 212.

Corrections also represent America's reliance on addictive commodities, only ends up temporarily ensnaring the morally dubious Enid Lambert and Melissa Pacquette and the still undeveloped Chip Lambert. Further, it actually hurts Axon's stock, which indicates that the drug did not further empower the corporate interests behind it. Infinite Jest V, which augurs society's complete societal disintegration, is thus far more pernicious than its comparable motif in Franzen's novel. In fact, insofar as *Infinite Jest V* is the apotheosis of a corporate product, the narrative's desperate search to locate its master copy and make sense of its wide-ranging effects is self-reflexive: Wallace, as a 1990s social novelist, is tasked with pinpointing corporate America's elusive logic and chronicling its omnipresence. With Infinite Jest, he embarks on his own elaborate, non-linear search.

Harbach adds that corporate marketing, with its attempt to zero in on and exploit human desires, is "a novelist's work, turned to sinister purpose."[130] This affinity between art and advertising provokes further exploration into the self-reflexive anguish clearly evident in the comparison between Infinite Jest and *Infinite Jest V*. Perhaps Wallace sensed that his own talents, which he poured into art that he considered spiritually nourishing interpersonal communication, could just as easily serve nefarious purposes. Wallace's twisted look into consumerism could thus be read as a horrified inward turn in which he discovered the seeds of his opponent inside of him. Or perhaps more simply, Wallace, like the addicted consumers profiled across his writing, recognized that he too took great but cheap pleasure in corporate America's offerings.

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[130] Harbach,"David Foster Wallace!"

Wallace plays out this tortured dynamic—that he writes with a purpose that he is tragically aware late capitalism makes impossible—within the novel's plot. He creates a hero in Don Gately who, unlike Wallace himself, has the capacity to elude the seductive logic of the commodity and to achieve the ultimate goal of his work, to "communicat[e] between one human being and another."[131] But Gately must overcome immense obstacles in order to do so. Through flashbacks, the novel tells of his childhood with his self-destructive single mother. The young Gately watches on as she drinks whole bottles of vodka and endures savage beatings and rapes. This back story implies that he inherits a genetic predisposition for addiction as well as memories that are difficult to confront with a sober mind. In the novel's present, Gately has heroically climbed his way out of addiction and works as a beloved and effective an orderly-counselor at Ennet House. Gately's arc reiterates one of the novel's major premises: the odds are stacked against anyone who wants to stave off the easy gratification offered by American consumerism.

Gately's success, the novel implies, owes to a literary clarity of purpose much like Alfred Lambert's in The Corrections. He is a concise and direct speaker who can cut through others' delusions, and he uses this ability in a manner Wallace finds morally venerable: he succinctly disproves other addicts' twisted logic when they try to justify relapsing. One such addict is Geoffrey Day, "a red-wine-and-Quaalude man" who "taught something horseshit-sounding like social historicity or historical sociality at some jr. college" (272). Accustomed to complex theories, Day cannot take AA clichés such as "one day at a time" seriously. Gately reminds him that these phrases are "(a) soothing and (b) remind you of common sense" (278). In such

[131] Wallace, "Greatly Exaggerated," 170.

moments, Infinite Jest valorizes precise, clear language as an antidote to the seductive logic of the commodity and elitism towards earnest communication. But at the time same, Gately's simplicity and self-restraint are at odds with the vast majority of Wallace's text. As a dizzying metafictional tome, the novel does not follow its own advice.

In fact, Wallace has created a hero who would have despised the circuitous and equivocating Infinite Jest. Gately criticizes minor character Randy Lenz, a small-time dealer and animal torturer, for fancying himself "a kind of hiply sexy artist-intellectual" (279). In his new posture, Lenz takes up what must have been one of Wallace's pastimes in researching for the novel, and in particular, for the copious information on prescription and illegal drugs in the "Notes and Errata": "And [Lenz] makes of a show of that [sic] he reads…he held books upside-down in the northeast corner of whatever room. He had a gigantic Medical Dictionary he'd haul down and smoke and read" (279). Wallace, albeit in a limited way, effectively aligns himself with one of the self-deluding addicts for whom the percipient Gately must care.[132] A tension in the spirit of English's notion of "play with independent dependency" emerges here. Even while his novel tries to distance itself from the logic of the commodity, Wallace writes self-consciously from the perspective of someone who has fallen prey to its allure. Wallace therefore acknowledges the central theme across the novels: economic forces threaten the status of art and the autonomy of culture.

[132] Lenz curiously resembles Chip Lambert from The Corrections in his leather-jeans persona early in the novel. Like Lambert, Lenz also convinces himself he has a screenwriting career and uses an unappealing combination of bookishness and bad boy flare to make up for fierce resentment and immaturity. These qualities are epitomized by Lenz's favorite article of clothing, a leather jacket.

While the other authors position themselves as saving remnants, Wallace concedes that he too has been co-opted by the market.

Epilogue

Radiohead's universally acclaimed album *OK Computer* (1997) resembles Infinite Jest in that it 'plays' with its relationship to consumerism and the dominant culture.[133] Wallace's genre, literary fiction, was undeniably pushed out of prominence by economic forces, while Radiohead's, alternative rock, faired well in the pre-Napster era. Music sales were soaring, and unlike in literature, a self-conscious separation from the mainstream could make for highly profitable marketing, as it did for Nirvana. Radiohead had already released two Platinum albums (*Pablo Honey* and *The Bends*), and the British press hailed them as heirs to the Beatles. But *OK Computer* diverts from the easily listenable guitar rock of their earlier efforts, clearly indicating a discomfort with the mass market.

The album, like Infinite Jest, is a formally fractured indict of the consumer economy. Yorke describes the lyrics of "Fitter, Happier" as both a checklist of slogans of the 1990s and "the most upsetting thing I ever wrote."[134] Rather than sing them himself, Yorke used an instantly recognizable voice from Apple Computer's SimpleText application. As the slogans blur into each other and become increasingly distorted ("will frequently check credit at (moral) bank (hole in wall)… at a better pace…tires that grip in the wet (shot of baby strapped in back seat)"), the song recalls both a computer crashing and a storm.[135] It is as if the shared rhetoric of the decade's

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[133] Radiohead, *OK Computer*, Capitol Records, 1997.
[134] Mac Randall, *Exit Music* (New York: Dell Publishing, Random House, 2000), 231.
[135] I am relying on my own transcribing of the lyrics, as the only published versions are expensive and unofficial.

advertisements and self-help books—also a subject across Wallace's writing—collapses in on itself.

On a basic level, Yorke and Wallace agree that the activities associated with economic prosperity in the 1990s—conspicuous consuming, relying on in-home technology for entertainment, exercising during leisure time, and striving for the right corporate culture instead of just trying to break even—lead to social alienation and conceal anxiety. And yet they both acknowledge their complicity and subsumption in the wider commercial economy. Wallace does so on a grand scale with the doubling of Infinite Jest and the addictive videotape *Infinite Jest V*, and in subtle ways such as comparing himself with the deluded Randy Lenz. Beyond Yorke's lyrics, Radiohead has an inspired tactic epitomized by "Fitter Happier": to bring the high-technology driving economic prosperity into the music itself. The album's title makes this same point: "OK, time to let in the behemoth, Computers." The band thus effectively announces that they too are part of the digitally connected empire of global capitalism that simultaneously alienates them.

The aura of high-technology is evident from the opening track. "Airbag" starts with a guitar riff that, though highly produced, could plausibly fit on their previous album. But the entry of the drums transforms the song: they are patently programmed rather than human-played, and their timbre is industrial and sharp, as if to announce that the organic sound of *The Bends* no longer reflects their reality. In the same vein, several of the album's songs end with instrumental chaos and a lone mechanical beeping. Perhaps the two most unorthodox (and frankly unreadable) sections of Wallace's text serve similar purposes. The inclusions of J.O. Incandenza's

filmography and the textbook-style definitions on prescription drugs might constitute Wallace's ways of representing that the 1990s high-technology-fuelled industries he found soul crushing (commercial film, Big Pharma) were omnipresent. Radiohead's foray into electronic music and Wallace's film and medical jargon thus gesture towards Jameson's view, that even autonomous art has been engulfed by late capitalism.

The internet and related technologies come up to varying degrees across the other novels discussed in this thesis. Only Ellis, who published American Psycho in 1991 and set his novel in 1988, misses the digital revolution entirely. With Cosmopolis, which is set in 2000 but was published in 2003, DeLillo seems to want to blur New York and cyberspace. Stock tickers run everywhere, and Packer cannot separate his body from an image of it on a screen in the novel's memorable end. Franzen's The Corrections (2001) was also late enough to catch a new breed of internet millionaires. His response to new technology is in keeping with his nostalgic conservatism and pining for a literary renaissance. Minor character Brian Pasafaro makes $19.5 million selling a piece of software called "Eigenmelody" that closely resembles internet radio station Pandora. A user picks a song, and the program then breaks down its sonic "coordinates" and finds other songs he might enjoy.[136] "Eigenmelody" thus starts with a basic premise: that art can be quantified. For Franzen, technology commodifies, demeans, and threatens culture. The renderings of the digital revolution across the novels, unsurprisingly, bear the marks of the authors' feelings about their declining status vis-à-vis newer media.

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[136] Pandora was still in development when The Corrections was published. It is likely that Franzen would have read about the Music Genome Project, an effort to collect data on music, which was undertaken with the support of Pandora's founders.

OK Computer approaches high-technology with anxiety, but the album lacks the obvious resentment of The Corrections. The fusing of conventional rock instrumentation and electronica gives the album rare social relevance: it acknowledges that new and old methods of communication and expression exist together in a precarious balance. Radiohead thus seems acutely sensitive to digital connectivity's emotional undercurrents. Perhaps their comparative luxury—working in a form and a genre not yet, in Franzen's language, "gutted" by the internet—allowed Radiohead to see beyond their own situations and relate to broader society's experience of technology and the market.[137]

[137] Franzen, "Perchance to Dream," 3.

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