The Middle Fringe: David Foster Wallace, Jonathan Franzen, and the American Novel

by

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Jonathan Franzen and David Foster Wallace are two of the most prominent American novelists of the past twenty-five years. Throughout their work, both authors take up many of the most pressing concerns of American fiction around the turn of the twenty-first century. It’s important and revealing to note that Wallace and Franzen struck up a correspondence shortly after the publication of their first novels in the late ‘80s. Their story of literary maturation was at least partially a specific result of the two authors’ budding personal relationship as “the best of pals and lit combatants” (Max 164), as Wallace once wryly put it1.

To tell this story, I trace the work and careers of both novelists against the larger cultural representation of the American Midwest. This thesis examines Wallace and Franzen individually, in relation to each other, and as part of this larger history. My purpose in this thesis is not to give a detailed history of their correspondence, but rather to point out the ways that both authors struggled together with many of the most pressing concerns of American fiction and culture at the turn of the twenty-first century. In particular, Wallace and Franzen gesture to and illuminate a much larger social, political, and economic narrative that has defined the production and reception the literary novel in postwar America.

Both Jonathan Franzen and David Foster Wallace grew up during a unique in American literary history, in which writers and intellectuals believed they could be prominent shapers of the national culture. Bolstered by widespread institutional and

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1 Unless otherwise noted, biographical information for Wallace is taken from D.T. Max’s biography, Every Love Story is a Ghost Story (2012), the first of what is sure to be many of books on the life of the late author, who committed suicide on September 12, 2008.
popular support for literature, the project of postwar authors and intellectuals could be understood as an attempt to occupy a central position of authority in this seemingly fertile cultural context. In the 1950s and ‘60s it was reasonable to believe in a center of American society, in which “cultural professionals of various sorts generate ideas and values that are disseminated outward to the periphery” (Schryer 11). Coming as it did at the beginning of the Cold War, their optimism was grounded in considerable social, political, and economic evidence.

As Stephen Schryer explains in Fantasies of the New Class: Ideologies of Professionalism in Post World-War II American Fiction (2011), the middle of the twentieth-century witnessed the rise of an educated middle class, in which it seemed plausible that artists, intellectuals, and novelists might operate as “records of conflicts in the cultural center” (Schryer 16). In his seminal essay “Manners, Morals, and the Novel” (1948), the critic Lionel Trilling claims “[probably] at this time we are about to make great changes in our social system. The world is ripe for such changes…” (27).

As the nation entered a period of unparalleled prosperity and education, Trilling put forth his hope that “the literate, reading, responsible middle class of people who are ourselves” might help shape public opinion and influence political decisions (13). Trilling saw the cultural center as up for grabs, and could see no more logical residents for this place of authority than intellectuals such as himself. Trilling’s hesitant sense of optimism is emblematic of the early postwar years, in which “writers and sociologists struggled to come to terms with their expanded influence yet ongoing marginality within the new class” (Schryer 27). In short, the
postwar years witnessed the rise and fall of the belief that serious artists could structure society from a culturally “central” position of authority.

Ralph Ellison’s classic novel *Invisible Man* (1952), a paranoid and panoramic view of race in postwar America, is an emblematic instance of a work of literary fiction that played upon the concerns of early postwar America to great critical and commercial success. This belief that authors and intellectuals might operate politically is put forth most programmatically in *Invisible Man*’s famous and programmatic last lines, in which the unnamed narrator claims to speak for those “on the lower frequencies” (Ellison 1952, 51). Ellison himself benefited from a culture that seemed ripe for change and open to input from artists: *Invisible Man* won the National Book Award, which in turn propelled the author into a role of cultural authority and national celebrity. In Trilling and Ellison’s time, a writer could still reasonably expect to shape American society and politics through their writing. By the time Wallace and Franzen were publishing their first novels, however, the wide ranging social, economic, and political shifts in the postwar years had made for a late postmodern culture in which a novelist could no longer aspire to speak for the nation’s consciousness.

As Midwesterners, both Wallace and Franzen are uniquely suited to reassessing how to conceive of this national “center.” In his extensive study *The Middle West: Its Meaning in American Culture* (1989), James Shortridge claims, “[the Midwest’s] experience has been tied closely to that of America in general, and it frequently is proclaimed to be the nation’s real birthplace and cultural core” (1).
Though many critics and readers have pointed to the region’s prominence in their work, the Midwest is much more than a useful and familiar setting to these authors. For both Wallace and Franzen, the Midwest’s declining role in shaping American culture provides a way into a much larger story about postwar mass culture and the shrinking cultural capital of fiction.

David Foster Wallace was born in 1962, and grew up in Illinois, where his father was a philosophy professor at the nearby University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana. Jonathan Franzen was born in Western Springs, Illinois in 1959, but grew up in an affluent suburb of St. Louis, where he would later base his first novel. Franzen would have a much more contentious relationship with the region where he grew up, and he would secret about its bland homogeneity. As Franzen would later reminisce: “I grew up in the middle of the country in the middle of the golden age of the American middle class…. And our town, Webster Groves, was in the middle of this middle” (The Discomfort Zone 13). At the end of the twentieth century, however, Wallace and Franzen realized that Midwest heartland could still serve as a powerful repository of sentimental American ideals.

As the geographical center of the country, the American Midwest has long carried curious and often paradoxical associations. In his 2008 essay, “Serving the Fruitcake, or Jonathan Franzen’s Midwest Poetics,” Ralph Poole provides a cursory summary of the historical depiction of the Midwest in literature. Despite the

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Midwest’s woeful inability to reflect the diversity contemporary American life, there persists a “common, nationwide understanding that this is a homogeneous, coherent region: the American heartland” (Poole 265). Poole argues:

> The Midwest is not an exceptional region like the South or New England, but this might exactly be the reason why it came to signify America as a nation. The fact that after the Civil War there was a nationwide movement to transfer the capital from Washington to St. Louis, i.e. to the nation’s geographical center, is a historical token for this argument.

(261)

Within national culture, “the Midwest came to symbolize the nation and to be seen as them most American part of America” by the turn of the twentieth century (Shortridge 33). Consequently, the first half of the century witnessed fiction that worked within and challenged this assumption: a Midwestern version of the High Modernist trope of the metropolitan author writing about his native hinterlands. In particular, Willa Cather, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Ernest Hemingway, all wrote fiction that juxtaposed the Midwest’s alternately rugged and industrious connotations with a more banal reality.

As the wide scale social fragmentation of the twentieth century gradually sapped this distinction of meaning, however, the geographically and culturally homogenous “heartland” came to seem like backward and sentimental notion. The region once associated with the classic American values of “pastoral idealism,” “unfettered youthfulness” and “world leadership in technology” finds itself without any coherent sense of identity in a globalized world in which these characteristics are now patently inaccurate and irrelevant (Shortridge 143). In his essay, Poole traces the
development of what he sees as a similar “Midwest poetics” in Franzen’s work through The Corrections (2001).

On every level, Franzen’s bestselling third novel marked a turning point in Franzen’s career: the novel, ultimately won the National Book Award and catapulted its author into the national spotlight. The novel is part of a larger turn-of-the-millennium trend of fiction and films that “focus on Midwestern ways of life” (264). In their attempt to find a space for art in a national and globalized context, Midwestern artists publicly grappled with the contradictions of their regional upbringing in ways that hadn’t been seen since the beginning of the century. This thesis traces the linked careers of David Foster Wallace and Jonathan Franzen through the early 2000s, during both novelists seemed to renounce their claim to being Midwestern.

Both Franzen’s The Corrections and David Foster Wallace’s Infinite Jest (1996) may be read as attempts to reignite the tradition of the great American social novel through the their personal narratives of growing up in the Midwest.

These authors’ simultaneous struggles to write their midcareer masterpieces illustrates how the literary novel might continue to exercise cultural authority even within a late postmodernist social order that seemed to force fiction the margins. “[The Midwest],” Shortridge claimed in 1989, “is no longer the epitome of all things American. Instead, after enduring its time of neglect, the Midwest has reemerged to fill the role of keeper of the nation’s values” (143). In espousing a new kind of

3 Poole’s list also includes fiction by Jane Smiley and Jeffrey Eugenides, and films such as the Coen Brothers’ Fargo (1996) and Woody Allen’s Melinda and Melinda (2005).
sentimental and regionalist route to the social novel, *Infinite Jest* and *The Corrections* represent the moment when both authors seemed to accept their roles as guardians of the literary novel within the late twentieth century cultural production.

Both the institution of the novel and the regional institution of the American Midwest would have to come to terms with a lonely and insincere mass culture whose conditions and values seemed antithetical to their own. Throughout a friendship and literary relationship that would span nearly two decades, Jonathan Franzen and David Foster Wallace constantly illuminate the parlous yet persistent trajectory of the novel in the last half of the twentieth century. In *Infinite Jest* and *The Corrections* both authors play upon and ultimately demystify “Midwesternness” and what Shortridge describes as “the inherent contradictions of a region that is said to be the nation’s heartland and yet is afflicted with insecurity” (2). By working in tandem through professional despair and personal depression, Wallace and Franzen redefine both what it means to be a Midwesterner and what it means to be a novelist in the twenty-first century.
Part I – Midwestern Elegies

i. Abiding American Dread

Early on in Jonathan Franzen’s debut novel The Twenty-Seventh City (1988), there’s a scene in which Duane Thompson, a minor character who bears some distinct similarities to a young Franzen, gets a ride home from Luisa Probst, the Stanford-bound daughter of protagonist Martin Probst. Thompson, a recent Washington University dropout and budding aesthete, shares with Luisa his suspicion that he is being watched — as it happens in the novel, a valid concern:

She stepped on the gas. “What are you, paranoid or something?”
“Yeah. Paranoid.” [Duane] leaned back in the seat, reached out the open window, and adjusted the extra mirror. “My life’s gotten kind of weird lately.” He pushed the mirror every which way. “Do you know Thomas Pynchon?”
“No,” Luisa said. “Do you know Stacy Montefusco?”

The comic scene is simultaneously a nod to a revered literary predecessor and one of Franzen’s most programmatic gestures to the waning centrality of the novel in American life. Thomas Pynchon, the author of classic and paranoid “systems novels” like Gravity’s Rainbow (1973) and The Crying of Lot 49 (1966), was a major influence on Franzen’s early fiction. He would later recall how, as a young novelist struggling to find a way to capture the world through his fiction, Pynchon’s enterprise of “creating an immensely complex world in which conspiracy is the organizing principle… was something [he] internalized and tried to build on.” (Paris Review)

This allusion in his first novel gestures to what would continue to be one of the most...
pressing concerns of his fiction: the anxiety that literature could not aspire to the same
cultural authority that early postwar writers like Pynchon could.

David Foster Wallace is similarly indebted to Pynchon’s fiction. It’s particularly difficult to imagine his debut novel, *The Broom of the System* (1988), without *The Crying of Lot 49*. *Crying*, Pynchon’s second novel, tells the story of Oedipa Maas. After being named the executrix of an ex-boyfriend’s will, Oedipa becomes convinced that a centuries old conspiracy named the “Tristero” is bombarding her from every angle. Her distinctly American struggle to preserve her autonomy serves as an unambiguous model for *The Broom of the System* (1987), in which protagonist Lenore Beadsman finds herself the victim of another vague conspiracy plot.

Wallace’s first novel borrows from the Pynchon so liberally that, when his editor, Gerry Howard, asked if he’d been inspired by *Crying* to write *Broom*, Wallace, anxious about seeming a plagiarist, lied and claimed never to have read the book. Like Franzen, Wallace realized, many American readers were losing their taste for novels like Pynchon’s by the end of the ‘80s. Howard’s reaction foreshadows both authors’ gradual realization of the shrinking market niche for complex and politically subversive books like *The Crying of Lot 49*. Wallace recognized that the paranoid novels their generation had come into maturity reading were losing their cultural potency; however, neither seemed able to write fiction of any other sort.
Though paranoia and distrust were nothing new to American culture, in the early postwar years especially the fear that vast conspiracies structured social life was uniquely convincing. Largely in response to the Cold War’s pervasive influence on the nation’s political, economic, and cultural institutions, authors were fearful that American society and individuals could no longer take their autonomy for granted. At the height of these national anxieties in the 1950s and ‘60s, paranoia was thus a viable structure around which to center a novel of social critique.

In his study of postwar American literature, *City of Words: American Fiction 1950-1970* (1971), Tony Tanner notes, “the possible nightmare of being totally controlled by unseen agencies and powers is never far away in contemporary American fiction” (Tanner 16). In the 1950s and 60s, a new generation of “systems novelists” – most notably Thomas Pynchon, William Gaddis, and, later, Don DeLillo – came to prominence by imagining vast systems that clandestinely controlled postwar American culture. Tanner frames this paranoid postwar phenomenon in terms of a longer history of liberal individualism and American identity:

…There is an abiding dream in American literature that an unpatterned, unconditioned life is possible, in which your movements and stillnesses, choices and repudiations are all your own […] and there is also an abiding American dread that someone else is patterning your life, that there are all sorts of invisible plots afoot to rob you of your autonomy of thought and action, that conditioning is ubiquitous. (15)

By aiming to capture the whole of the nation’s cultural consciousness through complex narratives, systems novelists could aspire to provide sweeping social commentary and thus wield cultural and political influence in a nation seeking to affirm its anxieties. Such a self-gratifyingly paranoid view of the world, equally
convinced of and fearful for its own autonomy, would continue to be a strain in American fiction well beyond the early postwar years.

In the late ‘80s, David Foster Wallace and Jonathan Franzen would still be attempting to achieve literary prestige and cultural influence through books that bear overwhelming similarities to those of the postwar systems novelists. Their debut novels – Wallace’s *Broom of the System* and Franzen’s *The Twenty-Seventh City* – are ambitious updates of the systems model. Both authors’ early fiction is full of characters that can’t be certain about their place in their own environments, and are constantly anxious about being influenced by vast conspiracies, to various degrees of self-delusion.

Set in the fictional Shaker Heights, Ohio, *The Broom of the System* follows protagonist Lenore Beadsman on a quest to unveil a vague but sinister plot to find her missing grandmother and namesake. In true systems style, the narrative imagines a never-quite-revealed conspiracy that may or may not be controlling every detail of Lenore’s life. At one point in *Broom*, Lenore describes, “I felt deep beneath all our feet a heavy liquid clicking, as if the gears and cogs of some ponderous subterranean device had moved into positions of affinity within their baths of lubricant” (375). Indeed, a somewhat perverse sense of paranoia is key to the novel’s overall conceit. Wallace explained how the idea for his debut sprang from a remark that a former girlfriend had made: “she said that she would rather be a character in a piece of fiction than a real person. I got to wondering just what the difference was” (81). Just like the novel’s winding, divergent narrative, however, this preoccupation with the
barrier between fiction and reality is never resolved in *Broom*, which was published when Wallace was just twenty-four.

A systems novel masquerading as a regional family drama, *The Twenty-Seventh City* also depicts a vast conspiracy, almost as vague and unexplained as the one imagined in *Broom*. Set in a slightly dystopian version of the St. Louis in which Franzen grew up, the novel centers on the well-to-do Probst family and oscillates between idyllic scenes of Midwestern suburbia and post-Reaganite urban decay. The strange events of the novel begin with the appointment of Indian émigré S. Jammu to the position of St. Louis police chief. The narrative gradually stretches across the globe to link the explosion to violent Marxist revolutionaries and the Indian aristocracy. Discussing a recent act of seemingly senseless terrorism, a minor character is suspicious: “‘Sure, it was an accident. But part of a pattern, brother. Part of a pattern’” (*The Twenty-Seventh City* 66). Paranoid passages and plot lines pervade both *Broom* and *The Twenty-Seventh City* and serve to place both authors in conversation with the postmodern novelists they grew up reading.

In one sense, 1980s systems novels such as Wallace’s and Franzen’s simply reinforce the notion that Tanner’s “abiding American dread” is still alive and well in the late twentieth century; in fact, Wallace’s and Franzen’s debut novels work to illustrate the larger anxieties surrounding the cultural, political, and economic viability of fiction at the turn of the millennium. By gesturing to the Midwest in their early fiction, both authors draw a severe comparison between the novel and another
ambivalently perceived American institution that finds itself robbed of its cultural centrality. Both The Broom of the System and The Twenty-Seventh City may be read for the ways in which the authors employ the complicated cultural connotations of the Midwest to juxtapose its heartland status against the bleak state of late postmodern culture.

These authors were far from alone in feeling that the literary novel as they knew it was becoming endangered. In Late Postmodernism: American Fiction at the Millennium (2005), Jeremy Green describes what he sees as an increasingly alarmist outlook in American fiction. “One of the curious features of the literary production of the 1990s, an era of notable productivity and ample achievement,” Green writes, “was a widespread dismay over the current conditions and future prospects of the novel” (Green 5). He goes on to singles out both Wallace and Franzen as emblematic of this loose group of alarmist authors – for the most part, white males educated to believe in the social and political value of literature – that he calls “elegists of the novel” (Green 5). Green argues:

The novelist’s sense of impending obsolescence is bound up with a perceived loss of cultural authority. Although the backward glance that imagines better times for the novel earlier in the century… is fanciful and nostalgic, the anxiety over present conditions remains powerful and indicative of genuine change.

(Green 7)

In other words, despite the more self-gratifying advantages of reworking such elegist sentiments to their contemporary state of American fiction, the young novelists had a point. Though the wide-ranging shifts in postwar America had once made for fertile economic and artistic soil in which the literary novelist could hope to achieve cultural prestige and political influence – in other words, operate from the cultural “center” –
this context had largely disappeared by the last quarter of the twentieth century. By continuing to place themselves in conversation with the systems novelists on every level, *Broom of the System* and *The Twenty-Seventh City* gesture to a time in which it was not unreasonable for the aspiring young novelist to understand the institution of the novel as a central part of American culture and politics.

In the early postwar years, favorable economic, political, and social conditions made for a cultural context in which an author could plausibly aspire to shape public opinion and wield political influence with just the right novel. For example, the wide proliferation of creative writing programs and literary prizes in the middle of the twentieth century contributed to authors’ senses of institutional legitimacy. In *The Program Era* (2009), Mark McGurl examines how “the university stepped forward in the postwar period both to facilitate and to buffer the writer’s relation to the culture industry and the market culture more broadly” (McGurl 15). The explosion in the number of MFA-granting programs was part of a new network of institutional and professional support for the legitimization and dissemination of fiction in the twentieth century. In addition to the rise in university support for writers, there was also a boom in the number of awards created for literature and the arts. As James English’s *The Economy of Prestige* (2008) discusses, the increasing prevalence and importance of such awards and contributed to a prestige-based economy of the global literary marketplace.

McGurl and English both point to the widespread institutional structures that, in the middle of the twentieth century, reinforced the idea of artists as important political figures. The culture of the ‘50s meant that figures like Trilling and Ellison
were able to become prominent shapers of postwar culture by championing cultural work. Indeed, the systems novelists that so informed Wallace’s and Franzen’s first efforts – Pynchon, William Gaddis, John Barth – all wrote at a time when literary fiction seemed to have a serious chance of actually changing the world. Their novels could afford to be ambitious in ways that the just a few decades later, the young Midwesterners could only imagine. As the ‘80s drew to a close, the hope that art might function as a source of cultural, much less political change, seemed woefully naïve: the socially astute novelist could no longer expect to speak for such a diverse and fractured society at large.

The postwar years witnessed a transformation of how Americans understood cultural institutions such as the novel. With the end of the Cold War especially, most of the social, political, and economic conditions of the early postwar years had disappeared. Whereas an author like Ellison could once plausibly put forth his ambition for *Invisible Man* to operate as “a raft of hope that might keep us afloat as we tried to negotiate the snags and whirlpools that mark our nation’s vacillating course toward and away from the democratic ideal” (Ellison xx), a mission of such stature could no longer be maintained. The coherent national culture of mid-century America was nowhere to be found by the time Wallace and Franzen were publishing their first works.

In their first novels, Wallace and Franzen pessimistically depict the Midwest in order to represent what they see as the bleak cultural landscape of the American in
the late ‘80s. In both novels, the Midwest setting functions at times shallowly as a kind of dystopic wasteland. In Wallace’s fictional 1991, four years after *Broom’s* actual publication, much of the region has been turned into the Great Ohio Desert, a federally-funded, man-made tourist attraction. Additionally, the epigraph for *Twenty-Seventh City* enigmatically claims that the story is set “in a year somewhat like 1984 and in a place very much like St. Louis.” By continuing to write fiction that thematically and structurally resembles those of the 1950 and ‘60s systems novelists, Wallace and Franzen offer an important historical counterpoint to the sense of displacement that writers like Pynchon and Ellison feared thirty years prior. In this late postmodern climate, the once-central institution of the novel seemed as culturally and politically marginalized as the backward and outdated American Midwest.

Throughout *The Broom of the System*, Wallace’s distaste for the Midwest reflects his larger critique of the novel as a cultural institution. *Broom’s* regional specificity is of utmost importance to the larger rhetorical argument of the novel: by mocking the Midwest via erudite allusions, philosophical allegory, and postmodern self-reference, Wallace also attempts to ridicule the cultural context of his writing. One of the novel’s many comic secondary characters, Mr. Bloemker, the director of the rest home from which Lenore senior goes missing, has a peculiar devotion to the region. Bloemker’s naïveté illustrates kind of perceptual paradox that has defined the region: “This area of the country, what are we to say about this area of the country, Ms. Beadsman? […] Both in the middle and on the fringe… We feed and stoke and supply a nation much of which doesn’t know we exist” (142). In *Broom*, this kind of
self-gratifying nostalgia is roundly mocked: as an uncultured Midwesterner, Bloemker is completely unequipped in the ways of the world. In one particularly memorable scene, Lenore has to point out to him that his girlfriend is in fact a blow up doll: “I thought she was simply extremely shy” Bloemker explains, “A troubled Midwesterner in an ambivalent relation” (142).

For Wallace, the Great Ohio Desert suggests the impossibility of looking for American ideals in the confusing and commoditized landscape of late ‘80s America. In a flashback to 1971, Wallace depicts the Governor of Ohio grandly conceiving of the desert as “A point of savage reference for the good people of Ohio... a place without malls. Something to remind us of what we hewed out of. Away from everything” (53). However, far from being a reminder of American ingenuity and frontier spirit, the G.O.D. is in reality a tourist attraction. The Midwestern wasteland can be seen to represent both the senselessness of the postmodern condition and the fallow literary context it leaves available to authors.

The Desert, the most obvious symbol of the spiritually empty Midwest, seems to exert a gravitational pull on Lenore throughout the narrative, and operates in a similar manner to Pynchon’s Tristero conspiracy. Toward the end of the novel, Lenore hysterically divulges to her therapist, “…What gets me is that it seems like everybody for some reason wants to get me out there. What I resent is just having no say in where I go or what I ostensibly want or…” (329). Her complaint recalls Wallace as an undergraduate, anxious to escape his Midwestern background, which even he can’t find interesting or hopeful.

4 The novel was originally titled “The Great Ohio Desert” (71).
5 Note the revealing acronym, G.O.D.
Such a failed ambition echoes how Tanner cogently links Pynchon’s Tristero conspiracy to “the possible existence of ‘transcendent’ meaning, almost equivalent to a redemptive vision of another America behind the material concretions of the land” (Tanner 178). Wallace’s ambivalent treatment of the Midwest parallels his anxiety about the viability of ambitious fiction like Pynchon’s and the early postwar novelists. Just as Pynchon’s heroine imagines that the Tristero, “might represent some secret, second America, which in many ways may be preferable or more genuine than the surface society” (Tanner 177), so too is Lenore led on a hapless quest for an alternative American dream.

Thomas Pynchon was Wallace’s first literary love; when an Amherst friend gave Wallace a copy of The Crying of Lot 49, it was, as an acquaintance would later note, “like Bob Dylan finding Woody Guthrie” (31). Pynchon’s paranoid view of the confusing mass media culture resonated deeply with Wallace – the novel made him “hear the click,” as he would go on to describe the sensation certain art gave him. After a bout of depression briefly sent him home from Amherst, Wallace returned to New England and read Pynchon’s gargantuan encyclopedic novel Gravity’s Rainbow (1973). It was after reading this seminal novel that Wallace realized he wanted to write fiction; however, by the time he was trying to publish Broom, he was denying that he’d ever read Pynchon. Ultimately, Wallace’s debut novel mocks the possibility of transcendent meaning through the paranoid mode of the systems authors.
Broom began as one of Wallace’s two theses his senior year at Amherst. That’s right – two. In college, Wallace stood out as a Midwestern oddity among the preppy graduates of elite New England private schools. This self-consciousness about his outsider status would influence into how he presented himself in his fiction: Wallace would later admit – on a number of occasions – that his early view of writing was essentially about the author proving that he was “really smart” (McCaffery 171). If Wallace’s first novel was indeed a mere attempt to show off, it was a wild success: both his theses received A+’s, and he graduated magna cum laude.

While the teachers and friends Wallace showed his manuscript to while at Amherst were positively dazzled with the young writer’s promise, his editor, Gerry Howard, was worried about how readers would fare with the stylistic liberties that Broom takes. The editor, perhaps made wary by Wallace’s blatant denial of Pynchon’s influence, was particularly concerned with the novel’s lack of a satisfying conclusion. Howard implored the young author to consider “the physics of reading,” the concept that the reader had a right to a gratifying reading experience. Wallace explained how much of the novel’s meaning depended upon complicated ambiguities such as these, and he explicitly cited the denial of closure in Pynchon’s novels as a textual model.

In espousing an idea of the novel that strived above all to defend the dazzling intelligence of the author, Wallace in his early fiction also illustrates how the author understood himself as at odds with his Midwestern upbringing: in the Illinois where Wallace grew up, “Midwestern virtues of normality, kindness, and community [dominated]. Showing off was discouraged, friendliness important” (1). The novel’s
complex relationship with these two ambivalently perceived American institutions – the Midwest and the systems novel – ultimately illustrate a larger concern with the production of late postmodern culture. Like the gravitational pull the Great Ohio Desert exercises on Lenore Beadsman, Wallace in his early fiction seems unable to escape the overwhelming influence of literary and cultural inheritance.

Jonathan Franzen does something similar in his first novel. Like Wallace, Franzen discovered Pynchon’s paranoid and complicated books as an undergraduate at an elite Northeast liberal arts college, Swarthmore. Upon graduating from Swarthmore with a degree in German language and literature, Franzen married his college sweetheart, another writer, and the two moved to New York in 1987. Franzen sold his first novel that same year.

Published the year after Broom, Franzen’s novel also depicts anxious Midwesterners in order to represent a larger sense of cultural displacement. Even in The Twenty-Seventh City, Franzen seems uncertain as to the viability of the systems novels he works to imitate. His narrative works to question the possibilities of political change on the scale of the early postwar years: the Midwest “heartland” of his childhood is repurposed as an “apocalyptic, postindustrial urban setting” (Paris Review). The title of the novel itself refers to St. Louis’ rapid decline over the twentieth century from the fourth most populous American city to the twenty-seventh.

As the contractor who built the Gateway Arch in Franzen’s fictional St. Louis, protagonist Martin Probst epitomizes traditional Midwestern values and industry. Commissioned in the 1960s, the Arch is an emblem of the grandiose ambitions of the
urban Midwest. Intended to represent the city’s status as a gateway to the West, the Arch is ultimately an expensive and purely symbolic public artifact. In The Twenty-Seventh City, its construction actually exacerbates the city’s woes, as most of the white population flees the gritty industrialization to the idyllic periphery of the suburbs.

The city’s disintegration is largely partly the fault of this upper-middle class, epitomized by the civic-leadership group Municipal Growth, of which Martin is the hapless chairman. Composed strictly of affluent white men, the profit-driven Municipal Growth is throwback to an older form of culture comes under threat in Franzen’s St. Louis. The crumbling St. Louis illustrates Franzen’s larger frustration with an American social and political climate. As one character points out to Martin, “A bankrupt, crime-ridden inner city is fundamental to your outlook as an Old St. Louisan, and you don’t want it to change” (382). The group holds a monolithic influence at the beginning of the narrative:

In few American cities is fundamental policy determined by such a small and tightly knit nonpartisan group… Though the names have changed, the pattern of rule by a handful of established families with a romantic vision of westward progress has successfully replicated itself. (310).

To these complacent Midwesterners, “it still [seemed] that the westward development of the county would have no end” (133). Like the Arch, another symbol of Westward expansion, the purported function of Municipal Growth is in fact an empty and harmful institution. The corruption and eventual dissolution of Municipal Growth represents the displacement of conventional forms of cultural authority.
The antagonist of the novel is new chief of police S. Jammu, the former Commissioner of the Bombay police. Her optimism for the gutted inner city of St. Louis echoes the misplaced hope of 1950s intellectuals like Lionel Trilling, who believed that the time was ripe for massive cultural changes. Her interview in the St. Louis Post-Dispatch lays out her supposedly restorative intentions: “The city needs a new lease on life, a fundamental shake-up. If we can get the business community and citizens’ groups to aid us – if we can make people see that this is a regional problem – I’m convinced that in a very short time we can make the streets safe again” (11, emphasis in original). In the novel, Jammu becomes an inner city hero through her proposed civic plan of a merger between city and county, even as she works to corrupt St. Louis at the highest level. In her foreignness, femininity, and totalitarian authority, she is a parody of the paranoid systems novelists’ worst nightmares.

Over the course of the narrative, Jammu’s “State” slowly corrupts the city’s most influential citizens, but not in the politically effective ways she claims. Franzen gradually reveals Jammu’s connections to profit-driven terrorists aligned with all manner of corporations and foreign interests. A bevy of operatives aid her in a confusing and clandestine campaign of terror that plays upon the Midwesterners’ xenophobia. In an act of implicit payback for the costly and purely symbolic Gateway Arch, the State aims to bring about destruction in the guise of restoration. Just as the restorative ambition of 1950s intellectuals proved naive, however, so too do Jammu’s provocative intentions fizzle in the wasteland of St. Louis. At the end of the novel, the all important municipal vote is ultimately decided in anticlimactic terms: “When little better than one eligible adult in seven had bothered to go to the polls, the only thing
anybody could say had carried by a landslide was apathy” (502). Martin’s and Jammu’s joint failure to make a difference in the narrative gestures to the decline of politically potent fiction in the postwar years.

Unlike Wallace’s purely ironic aversion to resolution, *The Twenty-Seventh City*’s bleak conclusion demonstrates a keen awareness of the distinct predicament of the novelist in late twentieth-century American culture. To quote Jammu’s programmatic *Post-Dispatch* article, we need to see that this is a “regional problem” in order to appreciate how *The Twenty-Seventh City* fits into a larger social history. Franzen uses the idea of a Midwest wasteland to focus his project of revitalizing the institution of the novel as an instrument of larger social critique – the broadest and most persistent goal of his fiction as a whole.

An episode around the middle of the novel illustrates the troubling sense of obsolescence. As the strange events of the plot begin to fall into place, a member of Municipal Growth reassures his chairman: “We’re at the center of things, Martin.” The anxious Midwesterner wonders, “How could he be at the center of things when he was so abysmally ill-informed?” (214). In his first novel, Franzen depicts the simultaneous crumbling of traditional Midwestern probity and the impotence of subversive political projects to gesture toward the fate of the novel in the late-twentieth century context of social and political paralysis.

As the novel’s anticlimactic ending demonstrates, Franzen ultimately conceives the Midwest as a setting in which change is impossible. The city that in the late nineteenth century once aspired to be the nation’s new capital has in Franzen’s
novel crumbled into an ambivalent wasteland. The Probst family lives in Webster Groves, a real suburb of St. Louis where Franzen grew up. During his adolescence, the neighborhood had gained a sort of cultural notoriety when it was portrayed as a typically stuffy and blandly bourgeois suburb in a 1966 CBS documentary called *16 in Webster Groves*. As Franzen would detail in his memoir, “The core value in Webster Groves, the value whose absence in *16* most enraged its citizens, was a kind of apolitical niceness” (62). The Midwestern ambivalence is ultimately stultifying in the novel: as Franzen’s narrator points out “…the universe would be a mighty poor place if every man were Martin Probst. It would grind to a standstill” (328). *The Twenty-Seventh City*’s listless suburban setting represents the apathetic state of American political culture toward the end of the century.

Both *The Broom of the System* and *The Twenty-Seventh City* won considerable acclaim and a Whiting Writers Award each; however, the minimal dust they stirred up settled quickly. As Franzen would later put it, “I’d intended to provoke – what I got instead were sixty reviews in a vacuum” (61). In their bleak novels, Wallace and Franzen anticipate too well the stagnant cultural climate of postmodern fiction; like Jammu and Municipal Growth, they “did not understand that America was outgrowing the age of action” (503). Even as each author seemed highly aware of the disparity between their contemporary literary culture and that of the middle of the twentieth century, their early novels ultimately fail to do much more than recapitulate and lament the passing of this bygone literary era.
As the ‘80s drew to a close, Wallace and Franzen seemed to realize the extent of the gap between their literary culture and that of the systems novelists that had influenced them. Their first novels had proved incapable – emotionally, financially, and artistically – of satisfying themselves or others. Both authors were depressed and frustrated with their work – they would eventually come to disavow their first novels as naïve and derivative. From 1889-1992, each found himself spinning his wheels over what to do next, both in life and in fiction.

ii. Thoroughly Conventional

After graduating from Amherst, Wallace enrolled in the MFA program in creative writing at the University of Arizona; however, he found himself no less depressed in the Southwest corner of the country than he had been in the Northeast. Wallace was quickly frustrated with the program and the endless procession of mindlessly polished short stories it required. His professors were conventional teachers of creative writing, and they were unimpressed with the young author’s winking postmodern style. As his biographer puts it, by the time he’d arrived at Arizona, “the comic energy and verbal dexterity had been replaced by something experimental, self-referential, and deliberately graceless.“ (62).  

6 His disappointment with Arizona seems inevitable when one considers the circumstances his admission: for his writing sample, Wallace submitted the first chapter of Broom, a carefully crafted scene in which a teenage Lenore Beadsman visits her sister at Mount Holyoke and is harassed by drunken Amherst frat boys. Though a faculty member championed its young author’s application, the scene looks nothing like the rest of the book, and nothing like the kind of fiction Wallace would go on to write.)
Feeling out of place, Wallace made most of his friendships with other students from the Midwest – his biographer suggests, “they tended to be simpler to read and embodied the culture of forthrightness he’d grown up with” (31). Having already sold his debut novel, Wallace at least found it easier to maintain his sense of superiority, both over his complacent writer-professors and his stylistically obedient peers. He received his MFA from Arizona in 1987, the same year he published *Broom*.

Wallace’s bitterness toward his experience with Creative Writing Programs and their monolithic hold on fiction production would inform one of the key claims of his essay “Fictional Futures and the Conspicuously Young.” Wallace argues that, as well-crafted and tirelessly polished as the stories that emerged from MFA programs were, their hermetic, institutionalized environment meant that this output was blandly homogenous and easily imitable. Though his complaints are certainly personal, Wallace is right when he points out “Never has a “literary generation” been so thoroughly and formally trained, nor has such a large percentage of aspiring fiction writers eschewed extramural apprenticeship for ivy and grades.” In the essay, Wallace’s biting critique of Creative Writing Programs is part of a larger complaint toward late postmodern culture and its stultifying effects of American fiction.

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8 In the essay, Wallace adds “These words are capitalized because they understand themselves as capitalized. Trust me on this.”
“Fictional Futures,” which appeared in the *Review of Contemporary Fiction* in 1988 when Wallace was twenty-six, serves to illustrate the prevalent and increasing concern toward the generation gap between the early postwar years and the late ‘80s. In the essay, Wallace examines the massive critical and commercial acclaim for – and equally harsh backlash against – the new generation of “conspicuously young” authors epitomized by Bret Easton Ellis, Jay McInerney, and, by implication, himself and Franzen. Wallace points to the dissolving boundary between the realm of literary fiction and that of popular culture. He claims, “We simply cannot ‘relate to’ the older aesthete’s distanced distaste for mass entertainment and popular appeal: the distaste may well remain, but the distance has not.”

Wallace’s point resonates with much of the postmodern discourse surrounding high and low culture, most notably in Fredric Jameson’s landmark essay “Postmodernism, or The Logic of Late Capitalism” (1984).

For Wallace, this trademark characteristic of late postmodernism is bound up with the social and economic history of the literary novel. Wallace was worried that the norms of televised art threatened to supplant the norms of all narrative art. “Fictional Futures” suggests that, in a time when the novel was in more danger than ever of becoming irrelevant to a generation raised by television, fiction had to compete with a stultifying mass culture. Wallace points to “our God-given right to be entertained---or, if not entertained, at least stimulated: the unpleasant is perfectly OK, just so long as it rivets.”

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10 ibid
explain the paradox of, “a culture in which an American public enjoying unprecedented literacy and disposable income spends the vast bulk of its reading time and book dollar on fiction that is, by any fair standard, trash.”

Even as Wallace acknowledges the gulf that separates novels at the end of the twentieth century and those of the early postwar years, the essay nevertheless demonstrates an idealistic notion of literature that gestures to the political ambitions once held by writers like Mills or Ellison. He argues:

…If the upheavals in popular, academic and intellectual life have left people with any long-cherished conviction intact, it seems as if it should be an abiding faith that the conscientious, talented, and lucky artist of any age retains the power to effect change.

Wallace’s insistence upon the novel as an institution of change illustrates his continuing nostalgia for a literary culture more in lines with America in the middle of the twentieth century. Faced with “the entrenchment of a culture built on Appeal,” Wallace’s essay ultimately illustrates his increasing concern with making a work of sophisticated art like the novel matter in an undiscerning culture. “Fictional Futures,” illustrates the ways in which the concerns of mid-century writers like Ellison or Mills have stagnated to a sentimental lament – Wallace’s earnest belief in the power of art reads as merely grasping at straws.

The upshot of Wallace’s frustration was that it gave him plenty to write about. He wrote his second book during his time at Arizona – Girl with Curious Hair (1989),

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11 ibid
12 ibid
a collection of short stories. Though “Fictional Futures” had optimistically warned readers to “get ready” for young writers’ renewed efforts to shape literary culture, Wallace’s own fiction seemed stuck in the same self-serving loops of Broom.

Wallace wrote to his agent, Bonnie Nadell, about his enthusiasm for the work-in-progress: “I’m sure page for page it’s a better book than [Broom]… maybe not as fun to read, but it’s smarter, and there’s a lot less deadwood” (98). Despite the hesitant reactions of Nadell and his colleagues at Arizona who read the manuscript, the young author was convinced he was breaking through.

The novella that concludes Girl, “Westward the Course of Empire Takes its Way,” offers an illuminating depiction of the standstill at which both Wallace and Franzen found themselves as the ‘80s drew to a close. The story is a re-telling of John Barth’s classic postmodern story, “Welcome to the Funhouse.” Wallace’s update centers around two MFA students in English – Mark Nechtr and his wife, D.L. – who travel to the fictional Collision, Illinois, where advertising executive J.D. Steelritter is holding a reunion for every individual who has ever appeared in a McDonald’s commercial. Though the sparse narrative consists mainly of the cramped shuttle ride to the convention, Wallace’s flamboyant use of postmodern techniques enables him to take on many of the thematic concerns of “Fictional Futures.”

A complicated pastiche of self-referential interruptions, pop culture allusions, and even direct addresses to the reader, “Westward” illustrates Wallace’s continuing preoccupation with the concerns of early postmodernists like Barth. What he has to say about his literary predecessors, however, is not so clear; as his biographer puts it, “he himself likely couldn’t tell whether he was writing an homage, a parody, a
eulogy, or an act of patricide” (91). As in *Broom*, Wallace sees the Midwest as the ideal setting for his disorienting postmodern drama: his narrator claims, “Central Illinois is, by no imaginer’s stretch, a Funhouse” (*Girl with Curious Hair* 242).

Wallace parodies the Midwest’s communitarian ideals in his ironic descriptions of McDonald’s as “the world’s community restaurant” (246). In staging his story in the Midwest – “the fringe that is the country’s center” (242) – Wallace again constructs the once-fertile region as a wasteland as confusing and unfulfilling as postmodern fiction.

Indeed, “fertility” is a major theme of the novella, which for Wallace reflects the difficulty of writing nourishing literature in the late ‘80s. The most clear example is in Wallace’s brief history of the town of Collision: “Fact: all Illinois communities, from well-built Chicago down to Little Egypt, have their origin and reason in the production of nourishment” (257). Lately, however, the endless cornfields have been ravaged by “Pest-Aside,” an excessively strong chemical compound produced by a Steelritter subsidiary. As the shuttle zooms through the Midwest countryside, Wallace’s protagonist notes a scarecrow in one of the cornfields that looks “somehow both novel and pathetic, like a stoic guard standing sleepless watch over an empty vault” (345). This symbol of the Midwest’s steadfast illusion of abundance, “novel and pathetic,” parallels the perceived decline of American fiction. Wallace carefully juxtaposes the lost fertility of the Midwest’s endless cornfields with the waning vitality of the American novel.

Wallace expands on his fertility metaphor when he describes Mark Nechtr’s struggle to “produce” fiction for his MFA program. Unlike his insufferable wife,
D.L., a self-proclaimed postmodernist who is working on writing a story composed only of punctuation, Mark yearns to write nourishing fiction. He wishes he could write “a song of tough love for a generation whose eyes have moved fish-like to the sides of its head, forward vision usurped by a numb need to survive the now, side-placed eyes scanning for any garde of which to be avant” (304). Mark ultimately finds himself unequal to this task and ends up writing a heavy-handed story about his experience at the convention. Though his fiction workshop heartily approves, Mark himself knows his story is garbage and wishes he could write something more sincere.

iv. Thoroughly Conventional

As he found himself increasingly unable to write, Wallace would soon come to feel a depression similar to Mark’s. When he read The Twenty-Seventh City in late 1988, he was floored and envious. The author recognized a kindred soul in Franzen, who was not only a young, liberal arts-educated Midwesterner, but was also clearly invested in updating the institution of the novel for the contemporary climate. He wrote in awe to the editor, Jonathan Galassi, who’d sent him the novel:

This book, a freaking first novel, seems so much more sophisticated than anything I could do plot-wise, so precocious in its marriage of theme and character and verisimilitude and phantasm, so simultaneously wild and controlled, that I found myself hugging criticisms of it to myself in unabashed self defense.

(115)

Franzen’s debut novel seemed like just the “song of tough love” that Mark craves in “Westward,” the germ of a kind of American social novel that Wallace had not
considered might still be possible. At Galassi’s encouragement, Wallace wrote to Franzen, and the two authors struck up what might be the last great epistolary relationship in American literature – a fitting fact, considering the way that Franzen and Wallace would emerge as figures hearkening to a simpler, slower kind of life, in the face of the irony-filled ‘90s.

Wallace sent Franzen a copy of the soon-to-be-published *Girl with Curious Hair*, expecting the praise he’d heaped on *The Twenty-Seventh City* to be reciprocated. Franzen, however, was largely unimpressed. He particularly hated “Westward,” of which he claimed, “the effect of the story was as if the reader had walked into a party full of assholes” (Max 123). As much as Franzen appreciated some of the story’s revolutionary rhetoric, he though that Wallace’s stylistic acrobatics undercut his message. He wrote back:

> By merely abstracting this story, aren’t you showing pretty much the opposite of what you’re telling? That you’re too impatient and too proud to do the stoop-work of creating character, suspense, and emotional involvement? For something that’s ‘NOT metafiction,’ the piece, as it stands, is awfully short on these commodities. (130).

Franzen’s reaction gestures to the increasing importance of the so-called “physics of reading” as a defining characteristic of his own work. Even Wallace, however, was realizing that cerebral brand of fiction was proving to be an unhelpful way of making a sincere claim for the power and value of fiction.

In his response, Wallace admitted that he had “a basically vapid urge to be avant-garde and poststructural and linguistically callisthenic – this is why I get very spiny when I think someone’s suggesting this may be my root motive and character; because I’m afraid I might be.” (Max 145). As an author character remarks in an early
story in Girl. “I’ve always enjoyed playing games with words in order to dodge the real meanings of things” (166). Whereas novelists like Pynchon could once thrive on the kind of recursive fictional strategies that Tony Tanner calls an “auto-destructive tendency” (180), a novelist in 1987 could no longer play fast and loose with their fiction and still expect anyone to read it.

Though Wallace was sure that his fiction was a leap forward from postmodern authors like Pynchon and Barth, but Girl’s muted reception seemed to confirm Franzen’s point – not many readers were interested in tackling Wallace’s bitterly whimsical homage to his literary predecessors. “This Jonathan Franzen guy,” he wrote Galassi, “keeps sending me these 15-page missives describing how I’ve violated every precept of fiction as a moral exercise, an affirmation of life” (131). Though Wallace glosses his frustrations with irony, he too was realizing how unfulfilling stories like “Westward” really were. As the ‘80s drew to a close, Wallace began to realize that his brand of postmodern experimentation wasn’t subversive, but outdated and trite.

Wallace’s ideas of fiction took an abrupt about face in late 1990. As much as he disliked the MFA program, Wallace was convinced that being in Tucson “clicked” with his writing. He managed to stay at Arizona for another year to teach a fiction class, and, found that he liked the work. However, his depression persisted. After months of suicidal feelings, he admitted that alcohol was a problem for him and
started attending Tucson AA meetings in 1988, and began taking the prescription drug Nardil, which he would be on and off throughout his life.

Though he had written *Girl* with relative ease, now his depression was making it difficult to write – which in turn depressed him more. After a year teaching in Tucson, Wallace enrolled in a graduate program in philosophy at Harvard but quickly found it incompatible with his depression. He wrote Franzen about how stuck he was in his work – he claimed, somewhat melodramatically, that he was no longer “a worthy opponent in some kind of theoretical chess-by-mail game from which we can both profit by combat” (143). After a few months in the program, he checked himself into McLean hospital with suicidal thoughts. Though he expected to return to Harvard upon his release, the hospital staff advised otherwise, and he soon ended up at a halfway home in Cambridge called Granada House.

Wallace soon found that he took to the routine of Granada House, though he was overwhelmed at first by the sincerity of the Alcoholics Anonymous group he was required to attend. Many of the recovering addicts he met at Granada House would serve as models for cast of characters that revolve around the halfway home he’d create in his next novel Despite his initial hesitation, before long Wallace seemed to be doing better. In a letter Franzen, he described the pleasure he took in an adventure novel – “a kind of ripping good read” (144) – that he’d picked up at random in the Granada house library. He also met the poet Mary Karr, who had also stayed at the home and continued to volunteer. She was recently separated from her husband, and the two began a tentative relationship.
Once he felt well enough, Wallace managed to get a job at Emerson College and continued to live in Boston. On the side, he tried but largely failed to write fiction. Despite his long-held hesitance to accommodate the so-called “physics of reading,” Wallace realized that he would have to come around to a more traditional approach to fiction in order to reach his audience. Having finally taken Franzen’s criticisms to heart, Wallace wanted to write a novel that could puncture rather than merely recapitulate the irony of mass culture. He wrote to ask his friend: “I’d love to hear more on what ‘humble, unpaid work an author does in the service of emotion and human image’ is… I admit it: I want to know. I have no clue. I’m a blank slate right now. Tabula rasa or whatever” (145). Franzen responded by espousing the values of character, story, and fiction as an engagement with issues of real emotional consequence.

Wallace responded with characteristic gusto, and had soon surpassed even Franzen in his penchant for the conventional. Within the space of a few months, he would claimed to have “adopted a Franzenian view” toward many of the postmodern giants he’d so admired (153). In a letter to Franzen, he described reading, for the first time, the sweeping realist novels that had dominated American literature at the turn of the twentieth century: “I’ve had to educate myself about people like Stephen Crane and Edith Wharton. Actually that’s been a blast. I had no idea they were so good…” (153). Wallace equated these social novels with Franzen’s brand of engaged fiction.

His literary re-education would entail a crucial distancing himself from the postwar systems novelists that had – for better and worse – shaped his early fiction. In one revealing episode, Wallace declared his disillusionment with Thomas Pynchon
after reading the author’s *Vineland* (1990), just three years after he’d published his Pynchon-saturated debut novel (130). In the space of just a year, Wallace had transformed himself from a flashy young novelist obsessed with postmodernism to a prophet of sincerity. By 1991, he declared: “The last thin patina of rebelliousness ahs fallen off. I am frightfully and thoroughly conventional” (153).

### iii. Rediscovering Sentiment

Despite the didactic letters he wrote to Wallace, Franzen struggled to escape the literary inheritance of the systems novelists. As the ‘90s began, he found himself writing a story about two lovers’ turbulent relationship in order to come to terms with his own crumbling marriage. The result was *Strong Motion* (1992), a novel that for all its apparent heart still looked an awful lot like *The Twenty-Seventh City*, this time wrapped in a narrative about a string of mysterious, man-made earthquakes that may or may not be manmade. Though *Strong Motion* works to take on more personal themes, what Franzen dully describes as “a long, complicated story about a Midwestern family in a world of moral upheaval” (*How to Be Alone* 62), was ultimately a lateral move for his fiction.

By the end of the century, even Franzen was forced to acknowledge that the era of the systems definitively over – as he would later admit, he’d had “an idea of the social novel that [he] didn’t realize was already outmoded.” Moreover, he seemed to have an outmoded sense of the role of the novelist. Writing in a time of cultural fertility, the systems novelists could expect a reasonable degree of literary status,
provided their work was powerful enough. Franzen would later describe, “For a long

time […] I took a hard line on letting my work speak for itself – refused to teach, to
review for the Times, to write about writing, to go to parties” (How to be Alone 86).

For Franzen, teaching at Swarthmore was a concession: though he claimed to take the
job in hopes that it would cure his writer’s block, the plain truth was that novelists
could no longer support themselves on fiction alone.

Though “elegists of the novel” like Wallace and Franzen were right to be
paranoid about fiction’s future, postmodern approaches seemed thoroughly redundant
by the end of the ‘80s. The problem with Franzen’s, as well as Wallace’s early fiction
was not so much an unawareness of their historical context, but rather an uncertainty
as to how aspiring literary novelists like themselves might work to occupy its center.
At the turn of the decade, both Wallace and Franzen were increasingly concerned
with how make to institution of fiction matter like it once did.

For both authors, this process would be a struggle: both Infinite Jest and The
Corrections would take far longer to write than their previous novels and only came
into being after a soul searching and stylistic refinement. Though Wallace and
Franzen continued to exchange lengthy letters, their first efforts to meet in person had
proved unsuccessful, mostly due to Wallace’s flakiness. They finally met in
Philadelphia in 1992, when Franzen invited Wallace to judge the competition for the
best work of fiction in his Swarthmore workshop. Here, Wallace also read an excerpt
from Infinite Jest for the first time in public. The section was a character sketch based
on Granada House residents, many of whom Wallace was still in close contact with.
He also continued to have feelings Mary Karr even after she accepted a teaching position at Syracuse University in upstate New York. From Philadelphia he was going to visit her in Syracuse, where he ultimately planned to move in hopes of turning their somewhat ambiguous long-distance relationship into something more real.

Anxious for a change of pace, Franzen and his wife had also been trying to find a new place to settle for some time. He agreed to accompany his friend to see Syracuse, but, due to some mixed emotional messages between Wallace and Karr, they only stayed for a night. For Franzen, the town blended in with the various other locales they visited from 1991-93: “We traveled to check out San Francisco, Oakland, Portland, Santa Fe, Seattle, Boulder, Chicago, Utica, Albany, Syracuse, and Kingston, New York, finding things to fault in each of them” (The Discomfort Zone 191). He and his wife continued to be unhappy in Philadelphia, all the time seeming to crave the kind of suburban façade of prosperity Franzen had described in The Twenty-Seventh City. In a last ditch effort to save the marriage, they borrowed money from Franzen’s mother “and rented a three-story, five-bedroom house that neither of us could stand to live in by the middle of 1993” (191). The idyllic setting, however, failed to do the trick, and the two were living in separate apartments in New York by the end of the year.

Even if the Syracuse plan was something of a bust, the ride back to Philadelphia proved memorable. Wallace and Franzen discussed literature the entire way, a prelude to the long phone conversations they would continue to have throughout their career. They came to the agreement that fiction should strive to offer
“a way out of loneliness” (Max 173). A few weeks later, Wallace wrote from Syracuse that their conversation had been “among the most nourishing for me in recent memory” (164). In their continued correspondence, they ultimately decided that the purpose of the novel was to be “neutral middle ground on which to make a deep connection with another human being.” As the middle part of their careers continued to be a particularly lonely period in both novelists’ lives, they were eager to write fiction that could alleviate this depression by communicating it through writing. After meeting in 1992, both Wallace and Franzen would become increasingly concerned with the ability of the novel to be a means of communicating sincere emotion across a fractured cultural landscape.

In the ‘90s, the possibility that art could function as a means of sincere, personal communication seemed slim. For Wallace, the difficulty of writing affecting fiction had to do with how pervasive the norms of television and pop culture had become. In his long essay “E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction,” published in the Review of Contemporary Fiction in 1993, Wallace diagnoses what he sees as a stagnant and fragmented “televisual culture.” The title of the article – ‘Out of one, many’ – inverts the national slogan of community in order to gesture to the increasing cultural snobbery of the late twentieth century.

Wallace’s chief purpose in the essay is to point to the dual truth that “irony and ridicule are entertaining and effective, and that at the same time they are agents of

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a great despair and stasis in U.S. culture” (49). Even though authors like himself and Franzen could attempt “to transfigure a world of and for appearance, mass appeal, and television,” late postmodern culture resists this transfiguration because of “the attitudes of passive unease and cynicism that television requires of Audience” (49). In other words, Wallace’s fears in “Fictional Futures” have come true by the early ‘90s: the norms of televised art have come to shape the production of fiction as well.

“E Unibus Pluram” illustrates the widespread conviction among literary novelists that their audience was increasingly under siege by mass culture. Wallace’s complaint gestures to the very real sense throughout the last quarter of the century that sources of authenticity and community were increasingly harder to come by. Yet this drove authors like Wallace and Franzen to crave a cure for their loneliness through fiction further, even at the cost of seeming outmoded. Toward the end of “E Pluribus Unum,” Wallace’s prediction for the next wave of fiction echoes the conventional turn of his own career:

The next real literary “rebels” in this country might well emerge as some weird bunch of anti-rebels, born oglers who dare somehow to back away from ironic watching, who have the childish gall actually to endorse and instantiate single-entendre principles. Who treat of plain old untrendy human troubles and emotions in U.S. life with reverence and conviction. Who eschew self-consciousness and hip fatigue. These anti-rebels would be outdated, of course, before they even started. Dead on the page. Too sincere. Clearly repressed. Backward, quaint, naive, anachronistic. Maybe that’ll be the point.

(81)

Wallace had been a devotee of straightforwardness and “single-entendre principles” since his epiphany over “Westward.” Moreover, he had been disillusioned by the hip and detached personae that many of his contemporaries seemed to adopt. What’s
most important in this passage, however, is the way in which Wallace seems to call for a return to a distinctly sentimental model of fiction and society.

The sentimental tradition in American literature extends to the nineteenth century, when the absence of central cultural and political institutions meant that the sentimental notions of family and community were required to stand in for broader notions of the nation. Joanne Dobson defines the genre as “a form premised on an emotional and philosophical ethos that celebrates human connection, both personal and communal, and acknowledgement of the shared devastation of affectional loss” (Szalay 187). The tradition continued into the twentieth century: with the New Deal and the development of the welfare state, sentimental literature became a way of celebrating the country as a whole through affecting moral narratives.

In New Deal Modernism: American Literature and the Invention of the Welfare State (2000), Michael Szalay describes the ways in which “the sentimental novel would evolve hand in hand with New Deal social policy committed to extending sympathetic identifications beyond the family, beyond the citizen’s immediate horizon of experience” (Szalay 172). Social novelists like John Steinbeck could embed grand political and economic narratives within the sentimental terms of family and romance. Szalay argues: “a core function of New Deal sentimental writing [is] its ability to displace private, biologically defined relationships of sympathy into impersonal, public form” (193). In the heyday of the New Deal, American social consciousness was concerned with the expansion of local, familial concerns to the national.
The middle of the century was replete with sentimental fiction that worked to collapse the distinctions between the institutions of family and government. Szalay calls Steinbeck’s classic novel *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) “the high watermark” of the tradition (167). For Szalay, the success of Steinbeck’s genre-defying social novel marks the beginning of the end of for the sentimental tradition in American fiction. During the early postwar years, however, as the welfare state came to be taken for granted among an unprecedentedly educated, middle class readership, the value of sentimentality came under question. According to many intellectuals in the 1940s and ‘50s, the pursuit of sincerity threatened personal autonomy – a fate unthinkable to the same paranoid culture that produced so many angry systems novels. In “Manners, Morals, and the Novel” Lionel Trilling had claimed:

> Some paradox of our natures leads us, when once we have made our fellow men the object of our enlightened interest, to go on to make them the objects of our pity, then of our wisdom, ultimately of our coercion.  

(215)

For 1950s figures like Trilling, even seemingly selfless sentimentality could only lead to the desire to possess and control. Enlightened personal interest at the level of the person and community was understood not to further political ambitions but to compromised them.

The viability of politically conscious sentimental novels like Steinbeck’s was bound up in the wider sense of optimism and nationalism in mid-century literary culture. The growth of institutions in the New Deal meant that individuals could see themselves as connected by a national community more so than ever before. Szalay demonstrates the ways *The Grapes of Wrath* advances the idea of “a shared national
identity” through characters that can un-ironically refer to a grander notion of “the country” (181). As the welfare state came to be considered an increasingly fixed part of public life, however, it was also subject to intense political and intellectual scrutiny. The sense of institutional security that Szalay identifies in The Grapes of Wrath was no longer thinkable in a context in which the notion of “a resolutely national population group” was no longer thinkable (181).
Part II: Late Century Fiction

i. Cracks and Ruts

By the last quarter of the century, concerned cultural critics began to look to the particular and communal in order to make sense of the general and national. In The Age of Fracture (2011), the historian Daniel Rodgers convincingly argues that, socially, economically, and politically, the country had entered “an age of fracture,” in which broad notions of community and nationhood were no longer viable. The Culture Wars of the ‘90s threw into sharp relief just how diverse and disparate were the groups that now composed the national culture. Rodgers points out that, whereas “twentieth-century social thinkers had encircled the self with wider and wider rings of relations, structures, contexts, and institutions,” by the last quarter of the century “the dominant tendency of the age was toward disaggregation” (Rodgers 4-5).

This fragmentation drastically altered the way that artists could position their work at the end of the twentieth century. The “lower frequencies” for which Ellison’s Invisible Man once claimed to speak had been distorted beyond recognition. In an attempt to fight the alienating effects of mass culture, Americans began to stress “smaller, more intimate, but also more partial understandings of society” (185). Increasingly suspicious of large cultural institutions, Americans were anxious for connection on the more basic and sincere level of the community. Rodgers traces the cultural shift from centralized institutions and perceived homogeneity to the ”local, small-scale, participational” model that he calls “the little platoons of society” (197). By the end the century, “[Americans] could desire a common culture,” Rodgers
writes. “But only in fragmented ways could they envision the institutions that might create it” (219)

As the notion of a centralized culture was increasingly exposed as fiction, so too was the possibility of a coherent audience for the literary novel. Literary novelists trying to reach readers at the turn of the twenty-first century were faced with the distressing realization that the only group for whom they were writing was themselves. In the middle of the century, the educated middle class had both the ambition and the leisure time to read literary fiction. Now, however, authors struggled to adapt to a niche culture in which the literary novel seemed increasingly incompatible with the varied demands of a fragmented marketplace.

Since separating from his wife in 1994, Jonathan Franzen had been living in Manhattan. When he wasn’t struggling with his difficult third novel, Franzen was busy despairing over the state of the contemporary novel. Frustrated by the limited reach of his first two novels, by the mid ‘90s Franzen was slowly realizing that the audience for literary fiction no the broad, homogenous entity it had once been, but in fact a socially and geographically disparate community. In his landmark 1996 essay “Perchance to Dream,” Franzen describes how he came to terms with the shrinking authority of the high literary culture, and “no longer mattering to the culture” at large (How to Be Alone 61).

The Harper's essay, as Franzen’s controversial piece would come to be known, marks the major turning point of the author’s career in which he comes to term with the place of the novel in “a noisy and distracting mass culture” (6). Franzen
compares his daily life to that of an early postwar counterpart, and acknowledges, “the educated single New Yorker who in 1945 read twenty-five serious novels in a year today has time for maybe five” (84). No longer could writers believe in what Franzen dismisses in the essay as “the myth of the general audience” (75). As television and mass media confound public demand for the novel, it reveals a national readership that Franzen refers to as “the hard core of resistant readers, who read because they must” (84).

As literary culture contracted, so too did the distance between author and reader. Echoing the idea of fiction that he and Wallace had settled upon during their drive back from Syracuse, Franzen claims: “Readers and writers are united in their need for solitude, in their pursuit of substance in a time of ever-increasing evanescence: in their reach inward, via print, for a way out of loneliness” (88). According to Franzen’s essay, the most pressing responsibility for literary culture at the end of the century was “to be more active in assuring ourselves that such a community still exists” (88). Once Franzen began to see himself as part of this new kind of literary community, he was better able to make sense of the overwhelming sense of loneliness that plagued authors like himself and Wallace in the ‘90s.

Franzen’s impassioned plea for human connection comes at the end of a widespread call in the last quarter of the century for a return to communitarianism and civic virtue. As Rodgers discusses, one of the chief tenets of late-century cultural critique held that “to think politically […] was not to imagine oneself, even momentarily, outside of human engagement…” (191). As the American obsession with systems and institutions gradually faded in the 1970s, intellectuals realized that
the midcentury distaste for the sentimental had the nasty side effect of widespread cultural alienation. The Harper’s essay represents a reaching out to a community of devoted readers that had never seemed more splintered and scattered.

The Harper’s essay describes how Franzen found answers in Paula Fox’s realist novel Desperate Characters (1970), a domestic melodrama that he claims to have picked up by chance while slogging through early chapters of The Corrections. Fox’s novel is notable for the way it is in line with a defining convention of sentimental literature, in which “sociopolitical issues are cast as family dramas, a maneuver that ultimately renders public policy an essentially private matter” (Szalay 166). The narrative follows the marriage of Sophie and Otto Brentwood, an utterly average couple who are childless and unhappy in New York. Franzen writes: “With its equation of a crumbling marriage with a crumbling social order, Desperate Characters spoke directly to the ambiguities that I was experiencing” (62). The novel details the Brentwoods’ turbulent relationship as it is increasingly plagued by a vague but persistent sense of impending crisis.

Given Franzen’s own fledgling Manhattan marriage and his despair about the culture, it’s not hard to see why Fox’s novel affected him so personally. Franzen offers a thinly veiled critique of his pre-epiphany self in his description Otto Brentwood: “As an unashamed elitist, an avatar of the printed word, a genuinely solitary man, he belongs to a species so endangered as to be all but irrelevant in an age of electronic democracy” (58). For Franzen, Paula Fox’s unassuming novel of manners marks the end of an era:
A quarter-century has only broadened and confirmed the sense of cultural crisis that Fox was registering. But what now feels like the locus of that crisis – the banal ascendancy of television, the electronic fragmentation of public discourse – is nowhere to be seen in the novel.

(58)

In *The Twenty-Seventh City*, Franzen had mocked the grand and empty symbolism of the St. Louis Arch in order to expose the impossibility of a coherent political identity. Now, however, he simply longed for the time in which such grand gestures were possible.

By the middle of the ‘90s, Franzen decided he had a duty to reinvent the unflinching poignancy of this cultural moment. To aspire to the sweeping social commentary of Paula Fox’s novel in the mass cultural age would require an acknowledgement of the drastically different conditions of literary readership and the marketplace. What it also seemed to require, however, was a return to a kind of fiction that in the postwar years had come to seem all but obsolete. Franzen calls the notion of fiction that developed from his mid-career epiphany “tragic realism.” This realist model is invested in the seemingly outmoded belief that “the formal aesthetic rendering of the human plight can be (though I’m afraid we novelists are rightly mocked for overusing the word) redemptive” (91). Like Wallace’s essay on television and contemporary fiction, the Harper’s essay represents a rediscovery of the sentimental values that midcentury authors had dismissed out of hand.

At the end of the *Harper’s* essay, Franzen describes a letter he’d gotten from Don DeLillo, one of the most important American novelists of the last quarter century. In the ‘80s and ‘90s, the popularity of paranoid and polemical books such as
White Noise (1985) and Underworld (1998) led many critics to consider DeLillo the major successor to early postwar novelists like Pynchon. The two authors had begun a correspondence while Franzen was researching the piece that would become the Harper’s essay. Both he and Wallace admired DeLillo’s ambitious systems novels, with which he’d gained cult status in the early ‘70s, and they considered him a major influence.14

The widespread shifts in the last quarter of the century had not gone unregistered on DeLillo. He too, realized that literary fiction now faced a fragmented cultural landscape in which serious readers seemed few and far between. However, DeLillo could also see within this context the political potential of the novel:

“…If the social novel lives, but only barely, surviving in the cracks and ruts of the culture, maybe it will be taken more seriously, as an endangered spectacle. A reduced context but a more intense one. Writing is a form of personal freedom. It frees us from the mass identity we see in the making all around us. In the end, writers will write not to be outlaw heroes of some underculture but mainly to save themselves, to survive as individuals.”

(95-96)

DeLillo’s prescient diagnosis gestures to the same concerns that were proving such stumbling blocks to Franzen’s and Wallace’s own fiction. In coming to peace with their reduced place in late-century culture, both Wallace and Franzen were also able to produce novels that marked a new height in their careers. The massive critical and commercial success of both Infinite Jest and The Corrections demonstrated the need for powerful and affecting fiction within a decidedly disjointed national culture.

Though the elegiac rhetoric of their early fiction seemed to mark Wallace and

14 Shortly after the publication of the Harper’s essay, Franzen would encourage Wallace to begin a correspondence of his own with their esteemed predecessor.
Franzen as the postscript to a bygone era at best, at the turn of the century both novelists could reclaim part of the national culture by looking to its “cracks and ruts.”

**ii. Illinois State of Mind**

As the two authors came to accept the more particular, isolated nature of late century literary culture, it seemed as if they could no longer continue to dismiss the other marginalized American institution important to their lives – the Midwest. In their first novels, both had perceived the region as a sort of social and political paradox – “the fringe that is the nation’s center,” as Wallace called it in *The Broom of the System* – in which to stage the maladies of contemporary American culture. Struggling to understand why and for whom they were writing fiction in a “noisy and distracting mass culture” (How to Be Alone 6), the feeling of displacement that defined their early work had given way to one of nostalgia and homesickness. By the late ‘90s, the same novelists who had grown up dismissing Midwestern sincerity were now its most fierce proponents.15

Rodgers offers a clue to this late-century shift in thought: “Where institutions, society, and power all seemed to be in recession, where change appeared to

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15 DeLillo would also respond to the shifts in late century literary culture by adopting a kind of return to a more traditional social novel. His Pulitzer Prize-winning opus *Underworld* (1997) was a gargantuan family drama that draws from the Brooklyn of DeLillo’s childhood with an unprecedented measure of personal engagement. Critics praised the author for his newfound sense of sentimentality and emphasis on the gritty stuff of emotion.
accelerate, nostalgia and anticipation became equally and immediately graspable” (225). Infinite Jest and The Corrections illustrate the ways in which the sense of political, social, and spiritual emptiness in the last quarter of the century evolved into an odd but resolute kind of nostalgia. Even if the Midwest “heartland” could no longer be said to fuel the broader concerns of a national community, it could at least act as a reminder of the time when such an ambition was possible.

Admittedly, the notion of the Midwest as a repository of communitarianism and sincerity was, in many ways, as hackneyed as the idea of the novel as an institution of change; however, as Wallace had claimed in “E Unibus Pluram,” this was precisely the point. When Harper’s gave him an assignment to write about the 1993 Illinois State Fair, Wallace welcomed being pigeonholed as a Midwestern writer. He didn’t fail to note the irony of representing a “swanky East coast magazine” in the humble state where he’d grown up. Upon arriving at the Fair, he divulges:

I suspect that every so often editors at these magazines slap their foreheads and remember that about 90% of the United States lies between the Coasts and figure they’ll engage somebody to do pith-helmeted anthropological reporting on something rural and heartlandish.

(A Supposedly Fun Thing 83)

Wallace met the call with his characteristic obsessiveness, producing a tough but loving depiction of rural Midwesternhood that was subjected to huge cuts before being published.

The essay, published as “Getting Away from Already Being Pretty Much Away from it All” in Harper’s, illustrates the way that Wallace began to open his eyes to the redemptive qualities of the region he’d parodied in Broom and
“Westward.” The Midwest still offered the possibility of participating in a community with a coherent, united identity. Indeed, seeking the company of others was one of the region’s defining traits. He realizes at the end of the essay, “the Fair’s deliberately about he crowds and jostle, the noise and overload of sight and smell and choice and event. It’s Us showing off for us” (108).

Despite the ironies attendant in writing the article in the first place, Wallace ultimately finds the Fair’s unabashed emphasis on human connection to be refreshing. By way of comparison, Wallace suggests that “the East Coast existential treat is thus some escape from confines and stimuli – silence, rustic vistas that hold still, a turning inward: Away. Not so in the rural Midwest. Here you’re pretty much Away all the time” (108). Wallace manages to read in the Illinois State Fair a vestige of real community that seems utterly unlocatable in the self-conscious irony of televisual culture and East coast snobbery.

When Wallace received an unexpected job offer from Illinois State University at Bloomington, the chance to return to his home state to teach and write fiction seemed serendipitous. His relationship with Karr was on the outs, and he was miserable in the gloomy city he had begun to call “Drearacuse” (173). Wallace was hopeful that the Midwestern setting would prove emotionally and artistically nourishing. He wrote to Don DeLillo about the opportunity:

…Everybody seems at one passionate and low-ego about teaching writing, and there was an utter absence of the Machiavellian politics that made Arizona such a gnarly place to be… If I do not like teaching at ISU, I won’t like it anywhere, and I can retire from the field assured that I’ve experienced academia at its nicest. (176)
If he had to teach in order to be a writer, Wallace wanted to do it somewhere that offered human substance beyond the program.

Though a large public school, Bloomington’s English department was known for their emphasis on avant-garde fiction – and they wanted Wallace for the faculty of something called the “Unit for Contemporary Literature.” During the phone interview, the nervous author exposed a bit of his old self, at one point saying, “You should know I am really, really smart (172). But when Wallace flew out for an interview, the self-proclaimed “Franzenian” author was not the edgy experimentalist ISU had expected – he told the department chair, an expert on John Barth, that Barth was dead (176). Wallace was interested instead in the gritty stuff of emotion: to paraphrase a mantra of his criticism in the early ‘90s, “If the heart throbbed, who cared what the head did?” (188) Thankfully, the department was charmed by the young author with the old-fashioned approach to fiction, and he got the job.

In this little avant-garde corner of the Midwest, Wallace played up his status as “the least weird writer” in his department (176). In class, he seemed to channel the type of creative writing teacher he’d clashed with at Arizona. His biographer notes, “Anyone who thought he was going to champion the department’s tradition soon realized he was wrong; his goals were traditional. The story should connect reader and writer” (188). His syllabus included adventure novels and Stephen King. Wallace had little patience with students that reminded him of his “postmodern” former self: on the first day of classes, he would often write lists of prominent theorists and esoteric critical terms on the blackboard and say something to the effect: “I know about all this stuff. You don’t need to remind me of it” (188).
Though he played up the role of “pedagogic hardass” (187), Wallace was remembered as a dedicated and inspiring teacher. He was happy in Illinois. He threw himself into teaching and A.A., both of which would provide stable communities for him. He started dating the daughter of his department head, with whom he finally seemed to have a committed relationship, and a highly conventional one at that—“they talked about wanting community and children” (181). Having acquired a new sense of adult responsibility, Wallace bought a house and adopted two stray dogs (189). With a safety net of friends in A.A., he was able to slowly start making a life in the Midwest. “I don’t know how recovery works,” he would tell his friends while he lived in Bloomington, “but it works” (179). He was less wary of the blind faith in himself and others that the program required; indeed, he realized that a sincere approach to A.A. was only way it would work.

His sense of fiction also deepened: he seemed more willing to risk seeming naïve or sentimental. In one memorable interview for the Review of Contemporary Fiction, Wallace disparaged Broom and claimed that the novel should take emotional risks. When prompted to talk about Bret Easton Ellis, the interview dissolved into an invective against cynicism and jadedness. “Fiction’s about what it is to be a fucking human being,” Wallace claimed, shortly before what would be the interviewer’s last question (McCaffery 179).

Despite the literary rebirth that his correspondence with Franzen had prompted, Wallace found that writing fiction was now, if anything, more difficult for
him. In contrast to his effortless experience writing _Broom_ – he described how he “couldn’t feel his ass in the chair” when he was working on the book – his next novel evolved in fits and starts. The story that would become _Infinite Jest_ had been in Wallace’s head since the late ‘80s, but he did not truly begin work on the manuscript – which he called “The Long Thing” – until the early ‘90s. He described in a letter to Mary Karr the epiphany he’d had about the drafts he’d realized were not so awful after all: “it just doesn’t go much of anywhere and is way too concerned with presenting itself as wittyarty writing instead of effecting any kind of emotional connection with people.” (158).

With great effort on the author’s part, _Infinite Jest_ slowly came into being, and by the middle of 1992 he had 250 pages and a proposal to send to Bonnie Nadell. By the end of 1993, Wallace had completed a first draft. Throughout the writing process, his editor Michael Pietsch had tried to refine and reign in the author’s gargantuan story. Though Wallace incorporated many of Pietsch’s suggestions, the initial manuscript was well over a thousand pages and included a section of footnotes that even the author had to admit were “just brutal” (162). He struggled to reconcile his intentions with what he’d produced:

I wanted to make a kind of contemporary Jamesian melodrama, real edge-of-sentimentality stuff, and instead I find it buried… in Po-Mo formalities, the sort of manic patina over emotional catatonia that seems to inflict the very culture the novel’s supposed to be about. (191)

In the years leading up to its publication in 1996, Wallace spent every spare moment crafting the messy story of _Infinite Jest_ into a sprawling but intimate depiction of familial strife, troubled patriotism, and personal redemption.
Oddly enough, while Wallace was hiding out within the Midwest, his fiction, at least on the level of narrative, seemed to be hiding from it. *Infinite Jest* bears little explicit reference to the region that the author once again called home. In fact, the novel was an unprecedentedly personal engagement with the traditional values of Midwest community, as evidenced through its straightforward engagement with the more personally charged themes of Wallace’s depression and alcoholism. Wallace’s novel is part of a wider cross-media phenomenon in the ‘90s of socially-conscious ensemble narratives, which Franzen would also continue. For example, the turn of the millennium witnessed the advent of television shows like *The Wire* and *The Sopranos*, both of which use Dickensian narratives and diverse casts of characters to depict microcosmic critiques of contemporary America.

In his novel, Wallace does something similar. In many ways, it’s difficult to reconcile the many disparate characters, digressive plotlines, and esoteric detail of *Infinite Jest* with the character-based social novel that Wallace claimed to want. What ultimately unites the near 1200 pages, however, is a sincerely felt attempt to depict and thus soothe the emotional catatonia of the late twentieth century. Though the two major settings of his novel – Enfield Tennis Academy and Ennet House Drug and Alcohol Recovery House [sic] – appear to bear little similarity other than their proximity to Boston, both operate in Wallace’s book as microcosmic social institutions in which the human is still locatable. The novel’s ability to displace

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16 A former student remembered Wallace once claimed, “I’m starting to develop the conviction that the best writing being done in America today is being done for *The Wire*” [http://kottke.org/08/09/remembering-david-foster-wallace](http://kottke.org/08/09/remembering-david-foster-wallace)
intrapersonal issues of family into matters of national importance places it within the tradition of sentimental social novels such as Steinbeck’s.

Like *Broom*, *Infinite Jest* is set in a dystopic near-future: in this story, the United States, Mexico, and parts of Canada have morphed into the Organization of North American Nations (ONAN). The merger has not been without its consequences: Everything is for sale in this new landscape, even the calendar years. *Infinite Jest*’s nonlinear narrative takes place in the Year of the Whopper, the Year of Glad, and the Year of the Whisper Quiet Maytag Dishwasher, to name a few. Moreover, unchecked pollution has resulted in the “Great Concavity,” a vast wasteland reminiscent of the Great Ohio Desert that comprises much of what was formerly New England. *Infinite Jest* sets up and critiques a morally bankrupt culture in which the language of a shared American identity is only suitable for parody.

The Great Concavity and the resulting ONAN-Quebecois struggle over who should assume responsibility for the area comprises the most darkly comic and Pynchonesque of *Infinite Jest*’s three major narrative threads, which overlap variously in plot and theme. As Wallace continued to cut down his draft, he found himself increasingly excising large chunks of this story in favor of sections that looked more like the “contemporary Jamesian melodrama” he’d set out to emulate. *Infinite Jest*’s two most important narrative threads revolve around two Boston communities that Wallace modeled after institutions important to his own life. The first of these is Enfield Tennis Academy, an elite training ground for the nation’s top tennis players aged 5-17. Hal Incandenza is the novel’s protagonist, a prodigy both on and off the

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17 In Canada, it’s called the “Great Convexity”
tennis court. Patriarch James O. Incandenza is Enfield’s founder, a suicide who was a prolific filmmaker in the last years of his life.

In the novel, Wallace details several of the late Incandenza’s films and provides appendices of many more. The late auteur has a penchant for technical acrobatics that puts one in mind of a less mature Wallace. In one passage, Hal notes the neurotic style of his father’s œuvre:

Technically gorgeous, the Work, with lighting and angles planned out to the frame. But oddly hollow, empty, no sense of dramatic towardness – no narrative movement toward a real story; no emotional movement toward an audience.

(740)

Wallace offers the James Incandenza character, absent in the narrative, as a tragic model of an artist who is all technicality and artifice. Another character offers a more blunt criticism, describing his films to be, “like a very smart person conversing with himself” (1028).

Infinite Jest’s slant toward this kind of art is tragicomic: Incandenza commits suicide by way of putting his head in a microwave oven. This episode is actually is the absurd legacy that kicks off and lingers over the events of the novel. The disparate characters and pieces of Infinite Jest are linked through a cassette copy of the eponymous film Incandenza directed. This particular “Entertainment,” as Incandenza refers to his films, is rumored to be so visually intoxicating that anyone who looks upon it is instantly transfixed and dependent, a shell of a person. The cassette’s potential as a weapon prompts a nationwide search of video stores and junk shops as Quebecois terrorists look to harness its narcotic properties against American culture.
The theme of deadly entertainment also links the story of the Incandenzas with the novel’s third major setting and narrative thread – Ennet House, a halfway home modeled after the time Wallace spent in Granada House. Just a few blocks away from Enfield on a map but worlds away in terms of socioeconomics, the Ennet House sections feature a similarly diverse ensemble of characters whose harrowing stories provide a panoramic depiction of addiction and urban poverty. Critics especially praised his unflinching depiction of this underworld: they were probably happy simply to encounter in the characters in a Wallace book that weren’t part of a hapless white middle class. Drawing from his experience with addiction and A.A., Wallace adopts the moral framework of the “Twelve Steps” of Recovery as a model for a highly conventional story of redemption.

The hero of these sections is Don Gately, the gentle giant who, after kicking a painkiller addition and the life of violent crime that attended it, stays on as a supervisor at Ennet House. Based on one of Wallace’s friends at Granada House, Gately and his story provide an unwavering and highly affecting depiction of the everyday torment of addiction. When Gately is wounded defending one of his charges in recovery from some unsavory Bostonians, his refusal to take painkillers illustrates the novel’s ultimately traditional defense of discipline and perseverance:

He could do the dextral pain the same way: Abiding. No one single instant of it was unendurable. Here was a second right here: he endured it [...] He could just hunker down in the space between each heartbeat and make each heartbeat a wall and live in there. Not let his head look over. What’s unendurable is what his own head could make of it all. What his head could report to him, looking over and ahead and reporting. But he could choose not to listen.

(859)
In the novel one reads Wallace engaging for the first time in truly personal topics and emotionally difficult themes. The Ennet House sections make this most explicit: the raw emotion that pervades these depictions is very much the work of someone intimately familiar with addiction and depression. Yet perhaps the best way of understanding how *Infinite Jest* is the work of an author newly reborn is through the game of tennis and the dysfunctional family drama that surrounds it in the narrative.

In 1993, the same year Wallace moved back to Illinois and began the arduous editing process of *Infinite Jest*, an essay he wrote appeared as part of a collection of reflective pieces called *Townships: Pieces of the Midwest* (1993), edited by his friend Michael Martone. In the essay, titled “Derivative Sport in Tornado Alley,” Wallace reminisces with open nostalgia on his childhood as a “near-great youth tennis player” (*A Supposedly Fun Thing* 4). As an adolescent, Wallace was especially good at playing the characteristic Midwestern winds to his advantage, and he claims that he would use his prodigious skills in math and physics to help him practice his angles. 18

After a late puberty eventually cut his dreams of tennis stardom short, Wallace felt the first inklings of the frustrations that would plague him as a writer: “Midwest junior tennis was also my initiation into true adult sadness” (12). By writing about the formative social experience of competitive tennis in *Infinite Jest*, Wallace craft a

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18 Regardless of whether the boast is an exaggeration, math certainly was a large part of his life before and after discovering writing: “Most of my memories of childhood,” he claims, “I could now reconstruct on demand with an edge and protractor” (8). *Infinite Jest* also makes use of mathematics, being based around a fractal narrative pattern called a Sierpinski Gasket.
complex but ultimately sentimental notion of what it means to be a human being and author.

This personal sense of the novel is partly reflected in one of Hal’s recurring dreams, in which he plays tennis before a vast crowd on a court composed of unnecessarily complex white chalk lines. Hal’s dream has all the spectacle of the professional circuit that Enfield students call “The Show,” yet none of the personal connection of an opponent or partner. Hal describes: “We sort of play. But it’s all hypothetical, somehow. Even the ‘we’ is theory: I never get quite to see the distant opponent, for all the apparatus of the game” (68). The notion is neatly applicable to the kind of self-consciously difficult fiction Wallace wrote at the beginning of his career. In the novel, Wallace adopts the seemingly banal communitarian idea that tennis, activity brings people together: Enfield Academy comprises a community in which tennis is the means of communication. Consequently, Infinite Jest illustrates a new appreciation for the intimate, almost nature of the author-reader relationship.

At the end of his essay, Wallace describes the routine motion of running drills with a partner. He recalls with relish: “the fugue-state that exhaustion through repetition brings on, a fugue-state I’ve decided that my whole time playing tennis was spent chasing… numbing and yet exquisitely felt” (19). For Wallace, playing tennis entails not only the pursuit of exquisitely felt numbness, but also being aware of others: “Unless you’re one of those rare mutant virtuosos of raw force, you’ll find that competitive tennis, like money pool, requires geometric thinking, the ability to calculate not merely your own angles but the angles of response to your angles” (9).
Wallace decided that the state of blissful inattention he’d found in tennis could also be the stuff of fiction. In the same sense, without a fully-formed sense of an entity called “reader,” a novelist can only produce something that’s all elaborate apparatus and no substance. *Infinite Jest* is a novel deeply concerned with the interpersonal institutions and technologies that bridge the communal gaps of an estranged culture. To read Wallace’s fiction is to reach out of loneliness by participating in a volley of ideas and emotions with the book itself.

Throughout the novel, Wallace puns on the word “Play” to draw thematic parallels between the communal activity of playing tennis and the more passive, solitary one of pressing “Play” on a VCR. *Infinite Jest’s* most memorable indictment against the alienating effects of televisional culture appears early on in the novel, in a digression about the brief history of video-telephony. With the advent of new technology that makes every phone conversation akin to a Skype chat today, the sudden exposure proves unexpectedly invasive. Unsatisfied early adopters soon acknowledge the necessary emotional removal of a traditional phone conversation: “This bilateral illusion of unilateral attention was almost infantilely gratifying form an emotional standpoint: you got to believe you were receiving somebody’s complete attention without having to return it” (146).

Such a phenomenon recalls the one-way intentions of a young Wallace eschewing the “physics of reading” – complex, self-serving fiction may as well be conversing with itself. As the spread of video telephony widens, a new demand is created for means of digitally touching up one’s video image – what is called
“Optimistically Misrepresentation Masking, or OMM” in the absurd marketplace of Wallace’s novel (149). The effect of this aversion to human contact is ultimately recursive, prompting:

…a return to good old telephoning not only dictated by common consumer sense but actually after awhile culturally approved as a kind of chic integrity, not Ludditism but a kind of retrograde transcendence of sci-fi-ish high tech for its own sake, a transcendence of the vanity and the slavery to high-tech fashion that people view as so unattractive in one another. (150-151)

Infinite Jest depicts a culture in which the increasing strains of mass detachment loops back to something more sincere. In the novel Wallace too embraces a seemingly “backward” approach to fiction via his conception of the novelist as unflinching moral compass. His literal return home to Bloomington and the university anticipates the evolution of his novel, which endorses a quintessentially Midwestern approach to life and fiction that emphasizes sincerity and the human.

Infinite Jest is not, however, without some of Wallace’s more idiosyncratic touches. The author had warned his editor that he was still uninterested in neat and tidy narratives: “Any sort of conventional linear ending for this stuff is in my opinion going to seem either linearly thrillerish in a way that doesn’t go with the rest of the book” (193). Though Wallace embraced some of the thematic ambitions of the sentimental novel, he still believed in the aesthetic value of the tragic and unresolved.

In the novel, it is Hal, the wunderkind stand-in for a young Wallace, who is ultimately undone by the alienating mass culture. The novel’s opening scene recounts Hal’s disastrous admissions interview at the University of Arizona, which takes place slightly after the main action and sets up the trajectory of the novel. As the
Admissions Deans increasingly press him on the disparity between his stellar academic record and a recent 0% score on the SATs, Hal is silent. For reasons at first unknown to the reader, he has been coached not to speak, “to err on the side of neutrality” (3) and let his uncle speak for him. In his head, Hal is his coolly rational self: “I am not just a boy who plays tennis. I have an intricate history. Experiences and feelings. I’m complex” (11). He rambles eloquently for some time with his eyes shut in concentration; however when he opens them again, expressions of horror greet him. In the following pages, the reader is given to understand that Hal is only coherent in his own head: on the outside, his careful articulation is actually spasms and animalistic sounds to everyone else.

The rest of *Infinite Jest* works to explain but never fully answers how Hal got this way. One logical and widely held conclusion is that Hal has been slipped DMZ – a fictional drug nicknamed “Madame Psychosis” in the novel – that he and a friend were planning to take at a later date. The DMZ explanation certainly works very well within the novel’s larger themes. At Enfield, Hal becomes increasingly dependent on marijuana, equally addicted to the high and the thrill of smoking in secret. Hal’s arc in the novel captures the ways in which a narcotic mass culture obscures the possibility of interpersonal communication, whether on the phone, on the tennis court, or in an obscure room of a University. Though Hal is surrounded by family at Enfield, they do not compose the kind of safety net that a public communitarian institution such as Ennet House provides its members.

Looking back across the postwar years to New Deal sentimental literature, Wallace’s novel emphasizes the contemporary inability of the family and the nation
to attend to issues of emotional import. Rather than the moral framework of the
Twelve Steps, what Hal gets instead is the opaque artistic oeuvre of his late parent.
The novel describes and critique san emotionally and nationally “fatherless” post-
postmodern landscape in which art can only reflect on its own emptiness. About
midway through the novel, Hal reflects on the emptiness of one of Incandenza’s more
challenging art films:

Hal, who’s empty but not dumb, theorizes privately that what passes
for hip cynical transcendence of sentiment is really some kind of fear
of being really human since to be really human is probably to be
unavoidably sentimental and naïve and goo-prone and generally
pathetic: One of the really American things about Hal, probably, is the
way he despises what he’s really lonely for: this hideous internal self,
incontinent of sentiment and need, that pules and writhes just under the
hip empty mask, anhedonia.¹⁹

(694)

Wallace’s free indirect style crystallizes in this passage to put in unambiguous terms
the kind of cultural jeremiad of Infinite Jest represents. By locating and celebrating
the human element in a country transformed by technology and cultural fracture,
Wallace breaks substantially from his more cynical postmodern predecessors.

iii. Corrections

Though Infinite Jest was a smash with critics, the conditions of book
publishing and niche marketing in the mid ‘90s meant that the novel’s reception
couldn’t end there. As the novel’s reputation grew and Wallace became the literary

¹⁹ Anhedonia, the clinical term for the inability to feel pleasure, is also an important
word Franzen. In The Corrections, his character Gary Lambert obsessively fixates
upon the word to describe his own emotional state.
toast of the late ‘90s, the author struggled, as one of his characters puts it, “to map out some path between needing the success and mocker-making of the success” (681).

Soon, Wallace received regular invitations to attend elite literary gatherings in New York, the city he once called “Sauron’s great red eye” in a letter to DeLillo (219). Though Wallace was happy that his novel was making people happy, he wasn’t interested in any of the high-status extras that went with it.

Despite his insistence that the novel “was not a hip downtown kind of book” (222), his publishers, Little, Brown insisted on a party for the novel’s release in a swanky Manhattan club. Wallace would later describe the party to DeLillo as “packed and scary” – he spent most of the party hiding out in a private room that overlooked the main floor (223). Though he swore the ostentatious literary event would be his last, he was also realizing, like Franzen, that the days in which an author’s work could speak for itself were over. “You guys made your bones in a different time,” he wrote DeLillo, “when the author’s own personal person wasn’t as necessary a part of a PR machine that itself wasn’t necessary to sell books” (223).

Living in Bloomington had cured the author of his need to prove he was “really smart” through his fiction. When Wallace received a so-called “genius grant” from the MacArthur Foundation in 1997, he wrote in a journal margin: “I am a MacArtuhur Fellow. Boy am I scared. I feel like throwing up. Why? String-free award – nothing but an avowal of their belief that I am a ‘Genius.’ I don’t feel like a Genius” (239). Now his geographical obscurity made him feel like a sort of token of the Midwest. The success of Infinite Jest made him realize that living in the Midwest was incompatible with what it meant to be a novelist in the twenty-first century. He
wonder how long he could continue to hide out in the margins of Bloomington, “blissfully ignorant” as he once put it, “of most of the Red Hot Center’s various roars and hisses’ (230).

The Harper’s essay, published the same year as Infinite Jest aims in part to be a survey of this contemporary literary culture. As Franzen later explained, “When your first two novels haven’t found much of an audience, it makes sense to stop and try to figure out who might read a literary novel nowadays, and why they might be doing it.” In his research, Franzen describes the disparate nature of the community of readers: “Class matters less in other parts of the country, especially in the Protestant Midwest, where literature is seen as a way to exercise the mind” (61). The essay goes on to note the profusion of small-town literary societies that continued to structure Midwestern social life well into the second half of the twentieth century. By the time he read a manuscript of Infinite Jest in 1995, Franzen had also realized that his woes as a novelist lay at least partly in his opposition to the community values of his Midwest childhood.

In need of a metaphor to describe the literary context in which he published his first novels, Franzen one again turned to his regional upbringing. “The institution of writing and reading serious novels,” he claims, “is like a grand old Middle American city gutted and drained by superhighways” (72). The central conceit of Franzen’s essay is thus one that explicitly reads the fate of the American novel against the regional narrative of the American Midwest. Both are social and political

20 Paris Review
entities that have gone from conceptually occupying the center of the culture to wasting away at its periphery. Franzen recalls, “At the heart of my despair about the novel had been a conflict between a feeling that I should Address the Culture and Bring News to the Mainstream, and my desire to write about the things closest to me, to lose myself in the characters and locales I loved” (95). Though the public surge of nostalgia and communitarianism had largely fizzled by the end of the century, Franzen was also still anxious to frame his concerns its language.

Franzen wrote the first chapters of what would become The Corrections in his Harlem office, where he installed a second window to offset the noise rising up from 125th Street. Though the novel was yet another story about the declining Midwest, Franzen largely abandoned the Pynchonian paranoia that provided the plot and structure of his earlier novels, and now wrote a more conventional realist novel about the interlinked fates of a middleclass American family. The novel tells the story of the Lambert family, who hail from the fictional Midwest town of St. Jude21, Iowa.

The traditional realism of Franzen’s third novel may be understood through how the author positions himself against Midwestern upbringing Alfred and Enid Lambert are throwbacks to a previous era of American prosperity and civic-mindedness. Their children, Gary, Denise and Chip, think otherwise. Franzen describes his characters as “three East coast sophisticates who alternately long for and reject the heartland suburbs where their aged parents live” (How to Be Alone 261).

Both are highly invested in the Midwest’s traditional association with these wholesome, community values. Enid in particular is defined by her “paroxysmal love

21 St. Jude is the patron saint of desperate cases and lost causes.
of place – of the Midwest in general and suburban St. Jude in particular – that for her was the only true patriotism and the only available spirituality” (The Corrections 117). As a model of civic responsibility and liberal individualism, retired railroad technician Alfred Lambert, represents a golden age of Midwestern industry that, like his own aging body and mind, is in severe decline.

Middle child Chip Lambert is the novel’s arguable protagonist and the character that best demonstrates the kind of metaphorical “return home” that The Corrections endorses for the larger institution of the novel. As a professor of Textual Artifacts at a D— College, at the beginning of the novel Chip represents the “angry and theory-minded” person Franzen admits to being in his early novels (How to Be Alone 4). Rather than the “chipper” good Midwesterner his parents want him to be, even Chip’s preferred name in his adulthood points to the constant “chip” on his shoulder.

After being fired over his affair with seductive and cynical co-ed Melissa Paquette, Chip finally finds work at the radical Warren Street Journal in New York, “where he sometimes felt insufficiently transgressive, as if his innermost self were still a nice Midwestern boy” (89). To compensate, Chip pierces his ear and takes to wearing leather pants. In his futile attempt to detach himself from all things connected to his Midwest upbringing, however, Chip re-enacts the same angry project of Franzen’s early novels.
Chip’s story comes to a head when he impulsively flees the country with Lithuanian revolutionary Gitanas Misevicius to exploit American businessmen looking to cash in on Eastern Europe’s economic precarity. Chip’s catastrophic experience in crumbling and corrupt Lithuania, and his eventual redemption through returning to St. Jude for one last family Christmas, suggests that his Midwest upbringing may be helpful in understanding the social novel’s place in the globalized twenty-first century. Upon Chip’s arrival in St. Jude, he finds a world he doesn’t recognize: “The traveler didn’t see how such a place could exist in a world of Lithuanias and Polands… It seemed mirage-like. It seemed like an exceptionally vivid memory of something beloved and dead” (536). In this scene, Franzen’s relationship to his regional upbringing is crystallized: the Midwest is no longer a microcosm of the nation, but rather a place in which the impossibility of such a national center can be considered.

When *The Corrections* was selected for Oprah’s Book Club shortly before its publication, Franzen himself faced a return home similar and no less daunting to Chip Lambert’s. Despite the novelist’s insistence that, “St. Louis doesn’t really have anything to do with my life anymore” (261), Oprah’s publicity team insisted upon filming Franzen in the Midwest town where grew up. In his essay “Meet Me in St. Louis” (2001), written shortly before the Club would announce his inclusion, Franzen describes his reluctance to play the part of the Midwestern author for the camera crews.

Moreover, Franzen was disappointed with the way his regional novel seemed to doom him, at least in realm of popular network television, to being a regional
author. “If the producers wanted me to be Midwestern,” Franzen eventually concedes, “I would try to be Midwestern” (262). Upon arriving in his childhood suburb of Webster Groves, however, Franzen realized how little it looked like the Midwest he’d imagined in *The Corrections*. Comparing himself to Marcel Proust’s narrator in *À la recherche du temps perdu* (1922), he writes:

I thought of the last page of *Swann’s Way*... the great oak trees that helped Marcel ‘to understand how paradoxical it is to seek in reality for the pictures that are stored in one’s memory, which must inevitably lose the charm that comes to them from memory itself and from their not being apprehended by the senses... The reality that I had known no longer existed.’

(265)

By comparing the Midwest to Proust’s Combray, Franzen makes a case for the region’s broader aesthetic and symbolic value. Though he constructs his regional identity within the exalted terms of the high Modernists, the subsequent events of 2001 would only further illustrate how misguided Franzen had still not quite come around to a fully Midwestern author.

Like Wallace after the wild success of his own third book, Franzen was uncomfortable with the public authorial role into which *The Corrections* thrust him. Readers and critics alike noted the contradiction when the novelist expressed his concern about that the Oprah Book Club sticker would branding his novel as one of the “schmaltzy” novels that Oprah had historically selected (272). His continued equation of his work with the High Modernist tradition seemed increasingly elitist and snobbish. When he claimed a few weeks later in a NPR interview, “I feel like I’m
solidly in the high-art literary tradition,” it prompted a public backlash from readers as well as novelists (Brier 157). In an episode that has come to be known popularly as ‘the Oprah Scandal,’ the Club promptly removed The Corrections from its reading list.

If “Meet Me in St. Louis,” illustrates how Franzen links these events to his inability to come to terms with his Midwestern heritage, the scandal itself demonstrates the author’s continuing failure to relate his work to the new literary marketplace. In his book A Novel Marketplace: Mass Culture, the Book Trade, and Postwar American Fiction (2009), Evan Brier writes, “Jonathan Franzen seemed intent on reviving the literary world of the 1950s when he expressed unease about advertising on the cover of his novel The Corrections and, more generally, about participating in Oprah Winfrey’s book club in 2001” (Brier 162). Pointing to the ways in which midcentury artists could once aspire to cultural authority, A Novel Marketplace reads this moment as a bookend to the early postwar years. Brier argues that twenty-first century literary culture has developed into a “niche culture” in which be read through the emergence of mass media and the niche marketplace. The rise of Amazon.com and the development the e-book meant that art fiction and schmaltz were both readily available. Despite the splintered nature of mass culture, the means of distribution for the novel adapted to its conditions.

For Brier, “that Franzen’s gesture fizzled in 2001 sets into relief some of the ways in which the cultural and economic place of the novel has shifted over the past half century” (162). Though Franzen claimed in the Harper’s essay that the novelist
was an endangered species, Brier points to the economics of abundance that define the new global marketplace:

In this age, the novel – the literary novel – is never endangered by market forces because, as long as a tiny audience wants to read it, it is possible and possibly even profitable to sell it… But in a world of never-ending supply, the literary novel is more marginal than ever from the perspective of cultural authority because, although it survives, it survives only alongside an infinite number of other cultural niche products. (161)

This invocation of niche culture suggests again the ways in which the novel must make its way in the “cracks and ruts” of the culture, the “little platoons” of American society. In constructing the ruined Midwest as an emblem of these late-century shifts, Wallace and Franzen frame the terms of the twenty-first century novel and the literary marketplace.

Wallace would also come to realize that he could no longer define himself by his Midwestern identity. In his essay “The View from Mrs. Thompson’s,” Wallace describes watching the 9/11 terrorist attacks from a elderly neighbor’s house in Bloomington. More and more neighbors similarly without television continue to stream in to watch. Across the country, the national crisis would trigger “an outbreak of civic-mindedness so extreme that it seemed American character had changed overnight” (Rodgers 258). In the epilogue to The Age of Fracture, Rodgers writes,

At every level, the 9/11 responses brought to the surface the complexity of thought and desire in the late twentieth century: the croscurrents that ran hard beneath its ascendant themes. But a culture and an administration steeped in market models of human action did not throw them off quickly. (264)
For a brief moment, it seemed that the nation would follow Wallace and Franzen in their rediscovery of sentiment and community. Within the civic idyll of the Midwest, however, Wallace encounters a sense of naive unreality. He notes, “Something that’s obvious but still crucial to keep in mind re: Bloomington and the Horror is that reality – any really felt sense of a larger world – is televisual.”22 As the Midwesterners watch in stunned silence, “What the Bloomington ladies are, or start to seem, is innocent… Nobody’s edgy or sophisticated enough to lodge the sick and obvious po-mo complaint: We’ve Seen This Before.”23 The moment illustrates the Midwestern lack of cynicism was precisely what had kept the author in the area for so long.

Wallace’s own emotional detachment from “Horror,” however, leads to a startling and troubling epiphany. Wallace concludes the essay with one of his characteristically rambling sentences: “…what I’m trying to explain is the way part of the horror of the Horror was knowing that whatever America the men in those planes hated so much was for more my own […] than these ladies.”24 In this time of national crisis, Wallace cannot adopt the innocence characteristic of his home. By the end of 2001, both Wallace and Franzen had realized that they could no longer claim to be Midwestern in any way other than their notions of fiction.


23 ibid
24 ibid
Epilogue: The Midwest Diaspora

Across the nation, the events of 9/11 in fact threw into sharp relief the vast differences in American culture that had taken place in the last quarter of the century. The twenty-first century promised to be a time defined by the absence of grand narratives that had preoccupied writers and intellectuals in the

‘The age of fracture had permanently altered the lay of argument and ideas. The pieces would have to be reassembled on different frames, the tensions between self and society resolved anew. But how that would be done, amid the anger and the confusion, the liberations and the anxieties, still hung in the balance.”

(Rodgers 271)

In post 9/11 America, both Wallace and Franzen would emerge as two of the most prominent shapers of twenty-first century fiction. Though they continued to find artistic and emotional nourishment in the traditional values of the Midwest, they also realized that the region was no longer tied by geography or culture. Rather, both would come to emphasize even further that fiction should link a community of readers. To be a part of this literary Midwest Diaspora was not to yearn for a lost sense of national community, but rather to be a “good neighbor” within the cracks and ruts of a new culture of fiction.

Wallace would finally leave the Midwest in 2002 to become chair of creative writing at Pomona College, prestigious liberal arts college in California that was worlds away from ISU. To Franzen, Wallace divulged that had been “home” for long enough – it was now “time to grow up” (267). Their friendship continued to link their fiction and careers even across the country’s fractured expanse – Franzen recommended him for the job after he himself turned it down. Though The West
Coast agreed with Wallace, it didn’t change him. Throughout his work, the author would continue to emphasize the tension between sincerity and loneliness.

Still living in New York, Franzen was re-conceiving of his Midwestern identity in a similar way. In his 2002 essay “Mr. Difficult: William Gaddis and the Problem of Hard to Read Books,” Franzen offers an implicit apology to the readers whom he’d alienated via the Oprah scandal. Acknowledging the contradictions of appealing to “high art” in a postmodern culture that had thoroughly dismantled such a distinction, Franzen declares himself an proponent of the “Contract” model of fiction.25 Franzen writes, “in my bones, I'm a Contract kind of person. I grew up in a friendly, egalitarian suburb reading books for pleasure and ignoring any writer who didn't take my entertainment seriously enough.”26, in which “Every writer is first a member of a community of readers, and the deepest purpose of reading and writing fiction is to sustain a sense of connectedness, to resist existential loneliness.” According to Franzen’s new conception of fiction, the community ideals of the Midwest are displaced into a new emphasis on the sanctity of the author-reader relationship.

25 This literary distinction can be traced back to the ideas of the social historian Sir Henry Maine, who argued in the nineteenth century that law and society had developed “from status to contract.” Maine claimed that society progresses from emphasizing the status of belonging to groups to an idea of the individual as an autonomous agent who may form associations with whomever they choose. Franzen wants to adapt the term in the twenty-first century without irony, but he certainly aware of its quaintness.

Wallace would not return to the Midwest until 2005, when he was invited to be the commencement speaker at Kenyon College, in Ohio. Sweating into his robe, Wallace describes the value of finding human connection in the most banal of places, from the supermarket to a traffic jam. What he ultimately seems to espouse is a kind of self-conscious communitarianism. His speech would later be published as “This is Water,” titled after a joke Wallace includes to illustrate his point about the importance of noticing the insignificant. For Wallace, learning to be a human being, has almost nothing to do with knowledge, and everything to do with simple awareness; awareness of what is so real and essential, so hidden in plain sight all around us, all the time, that we have to keep reminding ourselves over and over: ‘This is water. This is water’.

The point takes on new significance when considered against its Midwestern setting. The region that once seemed to act as a life-giving source of sincerity and community is, in a fractured twenty-first century, no longer bound by geography. In a noisy and distracting mass culture, the heartland associations of the Midwest are crucial not only for living in Ohio or Illinois, but in California, Manhattan, and, indeed, every niche of a country collectively pursuing happiness.

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