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Additional Information:

- This is an Accepted Manuscript of a book chapter published by Bloomsbury Academic in 9/11: Topics in Contemporary North American Literature on 25-08-2016, available online: http://www.bloomsbury.com/9781472569684

Metadata Record: https://dspace.lboro.ac.uk/2134/22493

Version: Accepted for publication

Publisher: © The Author. Published by Bloomsbury Academic

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Please cite the published version.
Jonathan Franzen’s *Freedom* and ‘the great national tragedy’

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How might we understand Jonathan Franzen’s *Freedom* (2010) as a post-9/11 novel, in a substantive rather than a trivially chronological sense? Although it does not focus on the terrorist attacks directly, *Freedom* does explore the aftermath of ‘the great national tragedy’ (Franzen 2010: 28) of 9/11, as it intersects with the attempts of its characters to, in one of the novel’s refrains, figure out how to live. Considerable discursive attention is given to the national mood and social ontology of Bush-era America; of the ‘Siamese-twin fundamentalisms of Bush and bin Laden’ the novel’s emphasis is very much upon the Bush administration’s ‘years of high-tech lying and manipulation’ (332-3). *Freedom* implies that, as Franzen puts the matter elsewhere, ‘the worse damage to the country was being done not by the pathogen but by the immune system’s massive overresponse to it’ (Franzen 2012: 152), or by what one of the novel’s characters refers to as ‘Bush II, the worst regime of all’ (Franzen 2010: 205).

For Joey Berglund, young Republican leaning son of Walter, the immediate effect of 9/11 is to induce an uncharacteristically ‘clueless’ act (Franzen 2010: 248). In his second week at university, Joey leaves his roommate Jonathan watching news coverage of the terrorist attacks on television and rushes to an economics lecture – only to find, unsurprisingly, a near empty lecture hall. If this misjudgement awakens in Joey the sense that ‘a really serious glitch had occurred’, the glitch involves his own personal narrative as much as any broader narrative of national identity, interrupting as it does numerous exceptionalist assurances heretofore that ‘his life was destined to be a lucky one’ (Franzen 2010: 247). This clueless act prepares the ground
for ‘his intensely personal resentment of the terrorist attacks’, engendering a sense of anger whose ‘specific object refused to come into focus’: not quite bin Laden, but instead ‘something deeper, something not political, something structurally malicious, like a bump in a sidewalk that trips you on your face when you’re innocently out walking’ (Franzen 2010: 248).

The difficulty of bringing political concerns ‘into focus’ experientially, their inseparability from personal concerns that are no less easy to focus, and no less bumpy, becomes a key preoccupation of the novel. Clashing with his liberal leftist father Walter, for instance, Joey finds himself ‘experiencing a hurt that felt structural, as if he and his dad had each chosen their politics for the sole purpose of hating the other’ (Franzen 2010: : 428). How much weight should be given to this experience? It might be considered that this moment rather inverts the task of novelistic realism, disclosing the structuring effect of the personal upon the political rather than vice versa. The ‘as if’ here will become important, signalling as it does the novel’s wish to implicate personal and familial relationships with the political without ceding a sense, not of their autonomy exactly, but of their own density and logic. Freedom is somewhat invested in the idea of ‘something deeper, something not political’, rather than regarding such depths as illusory.

Joey’s dislocation, the suspension of his feelings of entitlement and potency, begins to be remedied only as he fastens his sense of self to the flawed justificatory narratives woven around the invasion of Iraq. Watching the assault on Baghdad on Fox News, he ‘feels his long-standing resentment of 9/11 beginning to dissolve. The country was finally moving on, finally taking history in its hands again, and this was somehow of a piece with the deference and gratitude that Blake and Carol showed him’, impressed as they are by his involvement with the think tanks responsible for
planning the post-invasion reconstruction of Iraq (Franzen 2010: 420). This involvement is aligned in the narrative with Joey’s romantic pursuit of his roommate’s sister, Jenna (a name he associates, excitedly, with the Bush daughters), with a further estrangement from his father, and with his ongoing attempt to fashion a hard self in contrast to a liberal softness linked in his mind to his father and to masturbation: ‘Jenna excited him the way large sums of money did. He knew perfectly well that Jenna was bad news. Indeed, what excited him was wondering if he might become bad enough news himself to get her’ (Franzen 2010: 411).

As the political narratives justifying the invasion are discredited and cynically revised – from an emphasis on removing weapons of mass destruction to a deep if newfound concern for the liberty of the Iraqi people – and as Joey begins to feel sickened by the ethically flawed profiteering of reconstruction, another self begins to emerge. As Jenna had early intuited, in any case, Joey was ‘way too nice’ (Franzen 2010: 295) for the predatory financial world he aspired to enter. His ethical epiphany is accompanied by the (somehow touchingly reluctant) recognition of the depth of his commitment to his girlfriend and future wife Connie, ‘his caughtness in a story larger than himself’ (Franzen 2010: 431), but this newly felt story is personal rather than political. Somewhat inconveniently and, in literary critical terms, unfashionably, Franzen has Joey discover something approaching a core self or personality: ‘This wasn’t the person he’d thought he was, or would have chosen to be if he’d been free to choose, but there was something comforting and liberating about being an actual definite someone, rather than a collection of potentially contradictory someones’ (Franzen 2010: 459). Joey is thereby exempted, mercifully, from the thankless task of ‘Performing Identity in a Multivalent World’, the satirical title Franzen gives to an academic colloquium attended by Patty and Jessica. For Joey, ‘[t]he world
immediately seemed to slow down and steady itself, as if it, too, were settling into a
new necessity’ (Franzen 2010: 459), an experience (including the ‘as if’) which
captures something of the tone and aspiration of Franzen’s novel.

*Freedom* gives more attention to the impact of 9/11 on Joey than to any of its
other characters. His involvement as a college student with national defence
contractors, however, selling obviously inadequate spare vehicle parts to the military,
has been seen as straining credibility, threatening to undo the novel’s realism. Aine
Mahon notes ‘the unlikeliness of a university student being trusted with a military
commission amounting to tens of thousands of dollars’ – an opinion shared by Walter
– and finds this representative ‘of the occasional strain on Franzen’s socially realist
ambitions’ (Mahon 2014: 99). The strain is understandable. Mark Greif is in
agreement that the book’s ‘memorializing’ of the reconstruction of Iraq makes
*Freedom* ‘temporarily, absurd’, but finds this to be less a failure of the novel than of
the period it sets on record. For Greif, Joey’s scheme is realistic precisely because it is
‘cartoonish’, capturing the brazen ‘infamy’ of the profiteering at work in the
reconstruction of Iraq, a disaster which ‘interrupts the novel, rather than elevating it’,
since having little do with novelistic nuance (Greif 2010: 129).

Joey is not the only character in the novel to feel ethically compromised or
complicit, not the only misplaced self. *Freedom* is much interested in the politics of
popular music and the aestheticization of everyday life, from the mindless banality of
mainstream rock (as rendered by Walter, ‘Gotta be free, so free, yeah, yeah, yeah.
Can’t live without my freedom, yeah, yeah’ (Franzen 2010: : 154)) to the twee
sincerity of an indie scene ‘in harmony with consuming’ (Franzen 2010: 392) and the
reactionary political implications of the iPod. As a founder member of punk band The
Traumatics, it might be expected that Richard Katz would be all too familiar with a
wilfully self-sabotaging logic of futility and impurity – hard to sell out from within a punk form which already foregrounds its own complicity as a constitutive part of its anger. The commercial success of his alternative country album *Nameless Lake*, however, is distasteful to Katz, leading as it does to such ‘traumatic events’ as ‘(1) receiving a Grammy nomination, (2) hearing his music played on National Public Radio, and (3) deducing, from December sales figures, that *Nameless Lake* had made the perfect little Christmas gift to leave beneath tastefully trimmed trees in several hundred thousand NPR-listening households’ ([Franzen 2010: 204](#)). The freedom afforded by this success leaves Katz close to suicide, ‘his psychic gills straining futilely to extract dark sustenance from an atmosphere of plenitude and approval’ ([Franzen 2010: 205](#)).

According to Patty Berglund’s account, this mainstream success, however distasteful to Katz, leaves Walter with feelings of rejection and hurt that lead him to belittle his own accomplishments working for a nature conservancy. These feelings underwrite what Patty presents as an act of competition, on Walter’s part, as he starts to work from within a mainstream establishment in ways that are similarly (but far more) problematic in their complicity: ‘Within weeks of the release of *Nameless Lake*, he was flying to Houston for his first interview with the megamillionaire Vin Haven […] It was obvious to Patty, if not to Walter himself, that his resolve to go to Washington and create the Cerulean Mountain Trust and become a more ambitious international player was fuelled by competition’ ([Franzen 2010: 198](#)). Katz, indeed, does experience ‘envy’ of Walter for his ‘taking on Bush’s cronies and trying to beat them at their own game’ ([Franzen 2010: 231](#)); undoubtedly, though, this is also an authorial settling of scores on Patty’s part: acutely conscious of her own tendency to compete, she feels that Walter is less frank about his own competitiveness. Walter’s
attempt to do environmental good by working with rather than against the coal industry leaves him no less compromised than Joey, and he shifts his political energies instead to an anti-population growth agenda, an agenda that, albeit in different ways, proves no less problematic.

The interminably problematic or fraught character of Walter’s political convictions is symptomatic of the novel’s response to the alarmist response of the Bush administration to 9/11. It is a response at once confident and uncertain – a composite that is evident in the novel’s very form. Around a third of Freedom consists of an autobiographical document, ‘Mistakes Were Made’, written by Patty at the suggestion of her St. Paul therapist. Patty describes the document to Joey in flippant terms as ‘a little creative-writing project, for my own amusement’ (Franzen 2010: 260); it certainly proves ‘compelling and transformative’ (Franzen 2010: 487) for Walter, first in a negative sense, as he learns of Patty’s affair with Richard, and secondly in a more positive sense, as the ‘Conclusion’ to her project, ‘A Sort of Letter’ to Walter, sparked by Katz’s suggestion that she tell Walter ‘a story’, helps to write into being their eventual reconciliation. As Greif argues, just as a significant portion of the novel is presented as psychotherapy, Freedom itself can be regarded as ‘a work of therapy on deep unarticulated crises of America, but a cure at odds with the “culture of therapy” that is just supposed to make you happy’ (Greif 2010: 130).

Distinguishing between an Americanized and a Viennese Freud, the former ‘acknowledging hidden impulses and undoing neuroses by talk’, the latter drawing attention to the inescapably problematic nature of desire which holds ‘danger in both directions – towards restraint and freedom’ (Greif 2010: 129), Greif contends that neither Freud wins out in Franzen’s novel. For Walter and Patty, for instance, sexual expression is at once necessary and inadequate for happiness. Patty’s therapeutic
narrative is productive of sorrowful wisdom rather than happiness, involving as it does reconciliation to reality rather than fantasy (whether personal or national).

Writing of Franzen’s previous novel, *The Corrections*, and grouping it together with contemporary novels comparable in their conspicuous deployment of a recognisably realist mode, Richard Gray has suggested that ‘to label these novels realistic, because of their attention to the empirical details of a particular society and individual psychology, is to say what is probably the least interesting about them’ (Gray 2011: 67). Critical discussion of *Freedom*, however, has found Franzen’s realism to be of considerable interest. In some quarters, the novel’s reception has been marked by a certain sense of gratitude. This gratitude was in part directed to its ability to voice and entangle the empirical details and psychological vicissitudes of its contemporary moment; the *New York Times* review, for instance, enthused that Franzen ‘seems to gather up every fresh datum of our shared millennial life’ – a gathering up that might contribute to or conjure the sense of an otherwise fractured life as shared (Tanenhaus: 2010). The idea, moreover, that the white middle-aged subject has only to voice its discontents for a sense of reality to be restored is one that *Freedom* feels at once drawn to and repelled by. Interestingly, Franzen himself has cautioned against what he dubbed the literary critical ‘Fallacy of Capture’, ‘as if a novel were primarily an ethnographic recording’ (Franzen [2002] 2004: 259). The caution was meant to trouble the premise that a certain kind of formal innovation is required in order to represent newness. It is not the case for Franzen, for instance, that ‘our situation as suburbanized, gasoline-dependent, TV watching Americans is still so new and urgent as to preempt old-fashioned storytelling’ (Franzen [2002] 2004: 259) – particularly since the experimental strategies of postmodernism, for instance, are now somewhat old-fashioned themselves. Nonetheless, the caution holds for realist
novels too and, as if in awareness of the fallacy of capture, the same reviewer also lamented that *Freedom* ‘abounds in journalistic detail, some of it slapdash’ (Tanenhaus: 2010). It might be added that the novel’s adherence to a certain kind of accessible realism, or ‘old-fashioned storytelling’ not only leaves it vulnerable to middlebrow touches, but also renders its more literary moments as interestingly isolated and conspicuous. This is true, for instance, of the novel’s description of Joey as ‘alone with his body; and since, weirdly, he *was* his body, this meant he was entirely alone’ (Franzen 2010: 414), with its echoes of David Foster Wallace’s syllogistic style.

The gratitude characterising *Freedom*’s reception welcomed its apparent demonstration, as if in reassurance, that a certain type of realist novel might still be possible, and might speak of and to its moment in ways that unsettle as well as comfort and stabilise. Franzen’s own, critically informed essays in part prepared the ground for this emphasis on realism. His apparent privileging of ‘contract’ over ‘status’ novels, for instance, privileging readerly pleasure over writerly experimentation, can be taken to imply an allegiance to a familiar realism as against more avant-garde modernist and postmodernist literary modes, however we might then want to blur such labels (Franzen [2002] 2004: 240). If Franzen’s work is difficult then, as he puts it in another context, this difficulty is less a matter of formal difficulty than ‘the difficulty of life itself’ (Franzen [2002] 2004: 269). The novelist and critic Benjamin Kunkel has associated Franzen’s novelistic practice with what he refers to as a

new *self-conscious* traditionalism, a preference among many sophisticated writers and critics for what are felt to be tried-and-true ways of doing things.
For the novel, this means endorsing a relatively high degree of sentimentality, as against the chilly affect of someone like DeLillo or Brett Easton Ellis; a “well rounded” approach to characterization, as against a previously avant-garde commitment to the evasiveness or speciousness of robust personal identity; and an acceptance of all the artificial contrivance involved in the plotting associated with Dickens, say (Kunkel 2000).

*Freedom* may fairly safely be identified as an instance of what Kunkel tentatively terms the ‘*perennial novel*’. If such novels give an impression of ‘glacial stability’ in the face of a rapidly changing culture, however, that impression may be misleading, since this very stability may be taken to indicate the fundamental *openness* of the novel as a form ‘to new historical content – new ways of talking, eating, and dressing, along with new technologies, manners and beliefs’ (Kunkel 2000). Richard Gray has argued that ‘some kind of alteration of imaginative structures is required to register the contemporary crisis’ of 9/11 (Gray 2011: 29-30). Kunkel implies that, in principle, the perennial novel as a form may still register crises through its openness to new historical content. This openness need not be understood, moreover, in terms of uncritical passivity; if the realist novel lends stability to the world it describes, this might be taken as a condition of critique as against a reification of the social world. Franzen has described *Freedom* as an explicitly political novel, sharply critical, for instance, of the new ways of talking and technologies of Bush era America. *Freedom* is ‘open’ to these developments in the sense that it meditates upon their nature in resistant, uncertain ways; if such resistance is then subject to the twin threats of irony, on the one hand, and snowballing, destabilising ‘omnidirectional anger’ on the other
(Franzen 2010: 313), this is suggestive less of an absence of conviction and more of the self-questioning burdens of liberal subjectivity.

Gratitude for the achievement of a realist novel, further, is internally related to gratitude for the continued viability of the novel as such, lent salience by a sense that the culture at large has become inimical to the good of the novel. Franzen has written of how his ‘impulse to defend the novel … is stronger than ever’:

*Freedom* was conceived and eventually written in a decade where language was under as concerted an assault as we’ve seen in my lifetime. The propaganda of the Bush administration, its appropriation of words like *freedom* for cynical short-term gain, was a clear and present danger. This was also the decade that brought us YouTube and universal cell-phone ownership and Facebook and Twitter. Which is to say: brought us a whole new world of busyness and distraction. So the defense of the novel moved to different fronts. Let’s take one of those buzzwords, *freedom*, and try to restore it to its problematic glory. Let’s redouble our efforts to write a book with a narrative strong enough to pull you into a place where you can feel and think in ways that are difficult when you’re distracted and busy and electronically bombarded (Burn 2010).

If the perennial novel, as realised by Franzen, can resist this assault on language, it does so not by contrast with a discourse of purity but with a discourse whose authenticity is secured precisely through the transparency of its contested and uncertain nature, its ‘problematic glory’. At the same time, the novel form – its ‘way of talking’ – is presented here in more confident terms as in some way resistant to a state of distraction and busyness associated with new technologies, as providing or
restoring a location allowing for forms of feeling and thought that are otherwise endangered – it is hard not to draw a link here between Franzen’s concern for the novel and Walter’s conservationist concerns. The novelist and critic David Shields provides such a link, contending that Franzen’s traditionalism is self-conscious in the sense of mannered, the forms of feeling and thought it elicits essentially those of ‘nostalgic entertainment’ (O’Hagan 2010). Shields might agree that Freedom’s affective and cognitive properties differentiate it from a distracted culture, only now in the negative sense that its ‘antediluvian’ mode ‘fails to convey what it feels like to live in the 21st century’ (O’Hagan 2010). It might be felt that Shield’s intervention in itself is somewhat nostalgic, reprising as it does debates between realism and postmodernism, a reprisal that functions to reinforce rather than question the novel’s relevance.

If, as Kunkel reminds us, Franzen’s traditionalism is wholly self-conscious, then perhaps the forms of thinking and feeling elicited by Freedom should not be understood as automatically conferring anything other than problematic glories. What kind of self-consciousness is at stake here? Drawing on Stephen Burn’s account of Franzen’s work as in dialogue with postmodernism, Mahon contends that Freedom is self-conscious in the sense of self-reflexive. Mahon thereby troubles Richard Rorty’s opposition between cynical-experimental and patriotic narratives, finding Freedom to be both at once (Mahon 2014). Margaret Hunt Gram, meanwhile, argues that the political questions taken up by Freedom are variously occluded and stifled both by the mechanisms of realism and by Franzen’s investment in a reader centred, contract model of novelistic production: ‘In the world of Freedom, growth capitalism’s ecological and material depredations […] are allowed to become visible only insofar as their visibility promises not to threaten the novel’s own market value. They can
show only so much of themselves as Freedom’s imagined readers will fail to notice’ (Hunt Gram 2015: 309-310).

Near the end of Freedom, Walter Berglund’s Canterbridge Estates neighbours are said to detect a ‘political trembling in his voice’ (Franzen 2010: 576). This is a trembling that Freedom in some way shares. Resisting her hopes that he reconcile with his wife Patty, Walter acknowledges to their daughter Jessica: ‘I know you want a happy ending’ (Franzen 2010: 508). Franzen’s novel does supply its readers with something approaching this happy ending, in that Walter and Patty reconcile, and its characters attain chastened insight (although the matter of Jessica’s happiness is somewhat in question, given that she is dedicated like her father to a ‘declining and unprofitable enterprise’, albeit now ‘literary publishing’ (Franzen 2010: 567) rather than conservation). This personal happiness is hard won precisely because it is suspended within broader social, cultural and political questions that remain entirely fraught. As such, the novel’s happy ending, whilst unquestionably sincere and, as it were, earned, also feels provisional, tentative and self-conscious. Freedom does not allow itself a fantasy of negation, but it does work to refuse the false choice between ‘the dream of limitless freedom’ and ‘misanthropy and rage’ (Franzen 2010: 473).

We can usefully distinguish between the politics in and the politics of a novel. What happens if we take this distinction to Freedom? Provocatively, Jon Baskin has suggested that Franzen’s novels ‘are political in the sense that they contain characters who remain passionate about politics. But to the extent that they emphasize the negative emotional consequences (and causes) of political conviction, they are anti-political’ (Baskin 2012). ‘Anti-political’, of course, might mean a number of different things here; it might be taken to suggest the possibility of a contestation and redrawing of the political rather than its renunciation or abandonment. The moral to
be drawn from this association, within Franzen’s fiction, between negative affect and the political, remains wholly open. Neither *Freedom* nor its characters, for instance, could sensibly be held to be in retreat from the political – although it is something one can feel about the novel, and something its characters might wish for; both might rather be said to withstand the political, as they withstand the emotional. Something of this is captured in the tone of Franzen’s essay, ‘Inauguration Day, January 2001’, a brief, second person account of his bus trip with young socialists and fellow travellers to Washington in order to protest Bush’s inauguration. Having worn an appropriate ‘costume’ for the occasion, the ‘you’ of Franzen’s narrative returns home to find ‘a wholly different kind of costume hanging in your closet; and in the shower you’re naked and alone’ (Franzen [2002] 2004: 306). Selfhood here becomes a difficult remainder of the political.

Baskin’s claim that ‘negative emotional consequences’ are presented by Franzen as not just effects but *causes* of political conviction is troubling; it might (though need not) be taken in a reductive sense, as the suggestion that political convictions are merely affective residues. Certainly, as Baskin suggests, the intimate connection between political belief and emotional suffering is under sustained scrutiny in *Freedom*. When he joins Walter in Washington to discuss his friend’s anti-growth initiative, Katz is surprised less by the fact that his friend has become something of a political crank, since this was more or less predictable, and more ‘by what an angry crank Walter had become’ (Franzen 2010: 232). Spending a summer at his Mother’s lake house (‘secondhand paperback copy of *Walden* and Super-8 movie camera’ in hand (Franzen 2010: 483)), Walter’s solitude is brought to a halt by the arrival of his less transcendentally inclined brother, Mitch, who has friends and is not much interested in learning how to be alone:
he could hear the noise from half a mile away. Cock-rock guitar soloing, blunt drunken shouting, the dog baying, firecrackers, a motorcycle engine spluttering and screaming. […] He locked himself in the bedroom and lay in bed and let himself be tortured by the noise. Why couldn’t they be quiet? Why this need to sonically assault a world in which some people appreciated silence? The din went on and on. It produced a fever to which everyone else was apparently immune. A fever of self-pitying alienation. Which, as it raged in Walter that night, scarred him permanently with hatred of the bellowing vox populi, and also, curiously, with an aversion to the outdoor world. He’d come open-hearted to nature, and nature, in its weakness, which was like his mother’s weakness, had let him down. Had allowed itself so easily to be overrun by noisy idiots. He loved nature, but only abstractly […] Even when he left 3M to do conservation work, his primary interest in working for the Conservancy, and later for the Trust, was to safeguard pockets of nature from loutish country people like his brother. The love he felt for the creatures whose habitat he was protecting was founded on projection: on identification with their own wish to be left alone by noisy human beings. (Franzen 2010: 486)

These are adolescent thoughts but thereby formative; the suggestion here as elsewhere in Freedom is that, put bluntly, Walter’s political convictions are abstractions bound up with misanthropy. What follows from this? If Walter’s ‘neurotic anger’ (Franzen 2010: 521) and alienation inform his political sensibility, that need not discredit that sensibility outright as if in contamination; if negative affect is the mode within which the political appears, it may after all – to overwork the novel’s Thoreauvian pun – be
preferable to ‘see more of bi"erness and less of nothing’ (Franzen 2010: 484), a matter of finding an ‘enduringly discontented situation to struggle against and fashion an existence within’ (Franzen 2010: 529).

Walter’s lifelong dislike of the noisy vox populi is apparent in his work with Vin Haven for the Cerulean Mountain Trust, as his initial encounters with local environmental groups wholly hostile to mountain top removal lead him to the realisation that ‘he simply couldn’t afford to take his full case to the public. The clock was ticking; there was no time for the slow work of educating the public and shaping its opinion’ (Franzen 2010: 340). Far better, as he tells Katz, ‘to turn to a few billionaires [such as Vin Haven] than to educate American voters who are perfectly happy with their cable and their Xboxes and their broadband’ (Franzen 2010: 226). A significant difficulty with Walter’s strategy and sentiment here, of course, is its uncomfortable if partial echo of elements of neoconservative thought, in particular the notion of the ‘noble lie’ as voiced in the novel by Jenna’s father: the Straussian suggestion, couched in Platonic terms, that the ‘blurry shadows’ cast on the cave wall by the media should be manipulated in the name of a ‘greater truth’ (Franzen 2010: 284).

*Freedom* suggests that the overcoming of isolating anger is both the condition of a liveable life and the one thing needed in a broader cultural and political terrain marked by enmity and rage. Organising ‘Free Space’ events with Lalitha, Walter is troubled to find himself ‘immersed in the rage that was gripping the country that summer’ (Franzen 2010: 525). If conservative rage is ‘mysterious’ to Walter given that the Republicans ‘controlled all three branches of federal government’ (Franzen 2010: 525), he is no less alarmed by the way that this ‘conservative rage had engendered a left-wing counter-rage that practically scorched off his eyebrows at the
Free Space events in Los Angeles and San Francisco. [...] That 9/11 had been orchestrated by Halliburton and the Saudi royal family was near-universal article of faith’ (Franzen 2010: 525). Speaking at his Free Space anti-growth event, Walter finds himself applauded by his youthful audience only to the extent that he echoes his earlier ‘meltdown’ and provides ‘intemperate’ and ‘incendiary words’ – words that Freedom might nonetheless fully mean, of course (Franzen 2010: 525). His less glamorous leftist liberal emphasis that they should ‘be disciplined in their message … stick to the facts about overpopulation … stake out the biggest possible tent’ is met with either silence or a chanting of Walter’s anti-humanist environmentalist outburst, ‘Cancer on the Planet!’ (Franzen 2010: 525). The oppressive thought, for Walter, is that ‘the country’s ugly rage was no more than an amplified echo of his own anger’ (Franzen 2010: 525).

Whilst several of Freedom’s characters, by the novel’s close, have as it were become characters by negotiating hard emotional truths that have in some way driven their political standpoints, thereby attaining a degree of calm, the political trembling that may be taken to characterise the novel still remains. This trembling is not exactly a form of political uncertainty, since the novel’s political diagnosis of Bush-era America is hardly characterised by hesitancy. The novel’s trembling, rather, relates to the efficacy of its liberal voice as represented by Walter. Indeed, the novel can be viewed as something of a case study in the felt difficulty of articulating a liberal position; the overlap in Freedom between political conviction and emotional strife emerges as a symptom of this difficulty. The first we hear of him in the novel, his old neighbours in St. Paul are struggling to reconcile unflattering descriptions of Walter – “arrogant’, “high-handed”, “ethically compromised”’ – in a report on his work for the Trust in the New York Times with their memories of a smiling, modest man
‘greener than Greenpeace’ (Franzen 2010: 3). This reconciliation is well under way by the close of the novel’s first paragraph, disclosing as it does the collective neighbourly judgment that ‘there had always been something not quite right about the Berglunds’ (Franzen 2010: 3). The rest of the novel might be understood as a working through of this suggestion.

The opening section of Freedom, ‘Good Neighbours’, rehearses the history of the Berglund family home in Ramsey Hill, St. Paul, from their arrival as ‘young pioneers’ of urban gentrification in the early 1980s to the sale of the house soon after 9/11, as the Berglunds move to Washington for Walter’s work with the Trust (Franzen 2010: 3). The Berglunds’ liberalism is explored in some detail. They are presented as socio-culturally archetypal, at the vanguard of urban gentrification, thereby forced to relearn life skills that a previous generation ‘had fled to the suburbs specifically to forget’, such as ‘How to respond when a poor person of color accused you of destroying her neighborhood?’ (Franzen 2010: 4). Greif suggests that Freedom ‘takes up a form of American liberalism that doesn’t yet have a name: liberalism as niceness’, tracing ‘the agony of liberalism-as-niceness in an era that publicly rejected it’ (Greif 2010: 124). Some of Patty’s neighbours question the character of her good neighbourliness, or niceness, finding her habitual self-deprecation to be a form of condescension, for instance, since designed to put less accomplished homemakers at ease. When the sixteen-year-old Joey, as Walter puts it, ‘fires’ his parents and moves next door with the Monaghans, ‘everybody has the sense, fairly or not, that Walter – his niceness – was somehow to blame’ (Franzen 2010: 27). Memorably, Seth Paulsen deems the Berglunds to be ‘the super-guilty sort of liberals who needed to forgive everybody so their own good fortune could be forgiven; who lacked the courage of their own privilege’ (Franzen 2010: 7). Seth’s wife Merrie, however, refuses to see
Patty’s good neighborliness as in any way progressive, deeming it instead ‘regressive housewifely bullshit’: ‘frankly, if you were to scratch below the nicey-nice surface you might be surprised to find something rather hard and Reaganite in Patty’ (Franzen 2010: 8).

The attractiveness of the Republican Party to Joey is also presented in terms of a disputation of the nature of liberal niceness. Again, the political is bound up with the personal and emotional: anger at his mother’s unfairness and condescension to his girlfriend, Connie (daughter of ‘the only non-gentrifier left’ (Franzen 2010: 7) on the Berglunds’ block) leads ‘in a roundabout way’ to his sense of allegiance with ‘the party of angry anti-snobbism’: ‘What Joey liked about the Republicans was that they didn’t disdain people the way liberal Democrats did. [...] They were simply sick of the kind of unexamined condescension with which his mother treated the Monaghans’ (Franzen 2010: 417). Freedom is much interested in the functioning and significance of this ‘roundabout way’, of the entwining and co-articulation of the personal and the political. As Marco Roth notes, Freedom ‘holds the forces that govern our messy human lives and the forces that govern messy human societies in equal and unresolvable tension, without reducing one to the terms of the other. [...] This sustained irresolution drives the novel’ (Roth 2010: 123). This is part of what makes Franzen’s mode of perennial fiction both difficult and self-conscious – its return to character and emotion after the flat and affectless tendencies of postmodern fiction is less comforting than might at first appear, since these characters are in any case neither untroubled nor autonomous agents. The novel’s tentative resolution, precisely because, like the novel as a whole, it expresses political discord in domestic, familial terms but refuses to fully reduce it to those terms, leaves both the novel and its characters irredeemably caught up in ‘the insane making, velocitous world’ (Franzen
The roundabout relationship between the political and the personal is expressed by the novel’s tendency to picture the personal as structuring the political no less than vice versa: it feels to Joey as if he and his father have chosen their political allegiances in order to disagree with one another, but it can never quite be as simple as that. Walter’s sadness is at once ‘a world sadness, a life sadness’ (Franzen 2010: 513).

A further way in which the novel is self-conscious is that it refuses what Franzen takes to be one of the presuppositions of realism, ‘that the author has access to truth.’ As Franzen puts the matter, realist fiction:

implies a superiority of the author to his or her comically blundering characters. […] In Freedom, the recurrent metaphor is sleepwalking. Not that you’re deceiving yourself – you’re simply asleep, not paying attention, you’re in some sort of dream state. The Corrections was preoccupied with the unreal, wilfully self-deceptive worlds we make for ourselves to live in. […] And the realist writer can play a useful and entertaining role in violently breaking the spell. But something about the position this puts the writer in, as a possessor of truth, as an epistemological enforcer, has come to make me uncomfortable. I’ve become more interested in joining the characters in their dream, and experiencing it with them, and less interested in the mere fact that it’s a dream. (Burn 2010)

If Freedom’s characters are still figuring out how to live, then, this is not entirely a case of their stumbling towards a truth or truths already evident to the author or the reader. Walter’s political trembling, for instance, matches that of the novel, since both express the difficulty of being liberal in a period fairly dominated by conservative
voices. It is telling that in one of the novel’s key scenes – Walter’s Whitmanville rant, which captures the capaciousness of Walt Whitman’s poetry but delivers only discord rather than democratic unity – Walter seems to morph into an entertainer of sorts, ‘wresting the mike from its holder and dancing away with it’ (Franzen 2010: 514), an entertainer who repels his immediate audience only to find internet fame. The way that Walter’s jeremiad assumes something of a giddy, comic mode here is reminiscent, in a sense, of the role of television programmes such as The Daily Show during Bush-era America: offering a haven for liberal thought and leftist satire but combining certainty with a form of powerlessness, marked and potentially limited by what Franzen refers to in his ‘Inauguration Day’ essay as the pleasure of being ‘in violent agreement’ (Franzen 2002: 306).

Just how much of a crank is Walter, and to what extent does Freedom join him in his dream – how much of crank does the novel take him to be? For a time, before his work with the Cerulean Mountain Trust, he is kept awake at night by worries over fragmentation: ‘it’s the same problem everywhere. It’s like the internet, or cable TV – there’s never any center, there’s no communal agreement, there’s just a trillion bits of distracting noise. We can never sit down and have any kind of sustained conversation, it’s all just cheap trash and shitty development. All the real things, the authentic things, the honest things are dying off. Intellectually and culturally, we just bounce around like random billiard balls, reacting to the latest random stimuli’ (Franzen 2010: 232). It is hard not to align this sentiment not only with Franzen’s own jeremiads but also with his subsequent, self-aware recalibration of the scope and tone of their argument (‘I used to be a very angry and theory-minded person. I used to consider it apocalyptically worrisome that Americans watch a lot of TV and don’t read much Henry James’ (Franzen 2002: 4)). Katz’s deflationary, comic rejoinder to
Walter’s worries over fragmentation (‘“There’s some pretty good porn on the internet”’) does little to settle the question of Walter’s crankiness, because it feels too much like a gesture of embarrassment on the novel’s part and somehow more stilted than the over-earnestness it might otherwise interrupt (Franzen 2010: 232). In his ongoing attempt to figure out ‘how to live’, Walter feels the absence of a ‘controlling narrative’ (Franzen 2010: 338). Freedom is open both about its wish to provide such a narrative and about its inability to do so – the novel’s question – how to live? – captures the difficulty of giving existential content to liberal procedural norms.

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