

## Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections*: Ethics of Complexity

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### ABSTRACT

This paper examines Jonathan Franzen's particular version of realism in *The Corrections* in terms of a number of seminal concerns including the discourse of ethics, cognition, and social minds. As a (post-)postmodern writer, Jonathan Franzen conflates contemporaneity, timelessness, placelessness and nonbelonging of his time with naturalism's determinism and realism's detailed description to offer a new version of realism called neorealism or, in his own words, *tragic realism*. Central to this new version of realistic fiction is the illustration of a complicated network of community, place, and the individual. *The Corrections*, in this regard, is a novel whose humanistic aspects show Franzen's faith in the possibility of certain kinds of 'corrections' and hence changes in the ethical and moral conditions of the characters. Franzen's tragic realism, despite showing the tragic and deterministic aspects of life, makes his readers and characters rethink what has long been taken for granted about familial, communal, and generational relationships. Thus it rekindles hopes in the possibility of mutual ethical (re)cognition of *the other* attainable via retrospective questioning made possible in the individuals' oscillations between certainty and doubt (i.e. *epistemic imbalance*). Franzen achieves these effects through displaying the complexity of the ordinary aspects of the lives of ordinary people to revive faith in ethical, humanistic and even empathic responsibility, through describing the characters' appreciation of the ethics of complexity. These relations often involve accepting or tolerating human flaws as the juxtaposition of *tragic* and *realism* suggests.

**Keywords:** Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections*; (re)cognition; ethics; tragic realism/neorealism; post-postmodernism

### INTRODUCTION

This paper examines Jonathan Franzen's particular version of realism in *The Corrections* in terms of a number of seminal concerns including the discourse of ethics, cognition, and social minds. As a (post-)postmodern writer, Franzen criticizes his contemporary authors for their disappointing and depressive attitudes which have caused the novelist and his audience to be separated and disengaged. He wants to regain the readers' trust and confidence through involving them in his novels. To achieve this, he selects realism as the main mode and genre of his writing; however, realism in the twenty and twenty-first centuries, in an era when it is extremely difficult to tell reality from illusion requires him to present an updated version which he himself calls *tragic realism* (Franzen, 2002, p. 91). As the rubric indicates, this new mode is neither completely in line with the style of Franzen's realist predecessors' – in that it

lacks the overtly optimistic view of many realistic works – nor does the modifying adjective ‘tragic’ makes Franzen’s style completely identical with traditional naturalism. If naturalism in its traditional version usually implies environmental, class, and hereditary determinism undermining the notion of cognition and emphasizing the importance of coercion, in Franzen’s *The Corrections* these issues have been subtly embedded in different narrative layers entailing a kind of complicated system of cognitive involvement presented in relationships (ethical, humanistic, and even empathic). These relations often involve accepting or tolerating human flaws and even downfall (presented in the initial activities of almost all characters in the novel) as the juxtaposition of *tragic* and *realism* suggests.

Since a genre as a prototype represents special prototypical and presupposed concepts, the main characters in the world of the story are usually easy to identify, sympathize with, or loathe. Knowing this, Franzen opts for neorealism to gradually complete the “gestalt structure of conscious experience” (Palmer, 2004, p. 101) showing that our “conceptual integration” (Kristiansen, 2006, p. 203) does not only emerge from stored inputs to understand and appreciate novels but also from new structures and new loads of meaning. Thus, his use of extremely familiar and stereotypical themes and motifs such as (dysfunctional) families, generation gap, depression, and (business) failure initially boost the readers’ confidence in that the story is predictable for its initial accord with their schematic structures while in the course of the novel, at astonishing moments, they laugh uneasily at their employing readymade strategies. The neorealistic style entails assembling the tragic, the humorous, and the ironic together. This creates a “blended space” wanting “the viewer to unpack [the representation] into its inputs” (2010, p. 197) and to define the target again. This may provide the reader/character with an opportunity to think about the possibility of creating new domains through “regressive questioning” (Palmer, 2004, p. 228) (which is, in practice, by no means unproblematic). Franzen’s neorealism – advocating *situated consciousness* (p. 165) and human relationship which seem to be impossible at first – significantly contributes to the generation of a space which presents a kind of “compression to human scale” (Palmer, 2010, p. 197) and the possibility of approaching a normal life rather than characters’ initial fruitless longing for perfection, identifiable in the earlier parts of the novel in the form of highly ambitious characters. In so doing, Franzen offers a new version of realistic novel, one whose humanistic aspects (in the form of hopes, fears, dilemmas, and indeterminacies) make us hesitate about applying the terms ‘realism’ – associated with optimism – or ‘naturalism’ – inseparable from determinism – thus opting for a modified version of realism and naturalism (i.e. the more flexible and ethically-laden genre of *neorealism*).<sup>i</sup>

Despite his postmodern tendencies in presenting depressive and tragic issues, Franzen has also faith in the possibility of certain kinds of ‘corrections’ and hence changes presented in his characters’ and their relationships’ gradual transformation. It may be for the same reason that it is possible to simultaneously locate postmodern features like timelessness and placelessness in the form of contemporaneity,<sup>ii</sup> captivity, and immersion and also a tendency to depict society and the characters in their quotidian forms in *The Corrections*. These are best embodied in instabilities and tensions present in a (post-) postmodern society, in the geographically specified setting of the story (i.e. St. Jude in the Midwest), and dysfunctional social units (from family to the world). Franzen’s deliberate withdrawal of information through his use of omniscient narrator (another example of his return to and modification of a traditional narration/narrative tool in realistic and naturalistic fiction) together with his application of tangible motifs (through presenting different social, psychological, and even political schemata, which in turn activate default assumptions and expectations in the course of the novel) both put on display the perplexity of characters/readers facing these and remind them of the complexity (of everyday life and ordinary people). To achieve this, Franzen initially instills confidence into his characters and readers and makes them partial,

prejudiced,<sup>iii</sup> judgmental and even hostile towards their other fellow creatures; however, the induced self-assurance is later on substituted with doubt.

Owing to its neorealistic mode of presentation, Franzen's *The Corrections* is heavily referential and situated. However, as a degree of independence is embodied in the characters' moments of decision-makings, homecomings and career alterations, the novel can simultaneously approve and challenge traditional naturalism's concept of determinism. It is here that a more humanistic and complicated picture of individuals rather than one-dimensionally positive or negative individuals is presented. This equivocal aspect of situatedness (i.e. a simultaneously destructive and productive image) helps Franzen show individuals in different sorts of relationship with intermental units (like family, friends, colleagues, and society all presented in *The Corrections*) ranging from complete assimilation, to tenuous inclusion, to oppositional exclusion, and so on (Palmer, 2010, p. 64). The representation of these relationships, in turn, provides *The Corrections* with a more complicated aspect of human life.

### MIDWEST: (RE)COGNITION AND DETERMINISM

Franzen in his essays and interviews takes issue with the *depressive* style and artificially-detached mode of writing of postmodernist authors<sup>iv</sup> which, according to him, offer the reader nothing but depression and emptiness. Despite its tragic and naturalistic mode, *The Corrections* appears to be more humanistic in that it portrays the quotidian life of the members of a Midwestern family who are desperately struggling between being a member of the community – i.e. St. Jude and family – and freeing themselves from its intellectual, moral, and even ethical fetters. This, in *The Corrections*, embodied in the form of hesitations, indeterminacies, obsessions, dissatisfaction, and in the motif of quest, departures and homecomings causes *cognitive vertigo*, to use Zunshine's term, (p. 31) and leads characters/readers to both confusion and (re)cognition. The use of a contemporary family, round characters, and detailed and well-located geographical locations identical with Franzen's own birthplace makes the reader trust the text and start a carefree reading; however, as the passage proceeds, he finds his assumptions increasingly challenged and his confidence shattered. These 'corrections' are more evident when the passage gradually entails a more dynamic and active involvement which is at odds with the initial shallow reading. Franzen's choice of neorealism and places of strong social, political, ethical and even psychological implications foregrounds special stereotypes or at least expectations. However, in the course of the novel it becomes more evident that this is a strategy for delving into the *subframes* of what is taken for granted to unearth the forgotten and distrusted humanity lost in the age of superficiality and images.

The ample contextual description provided by *The Corrections*' neorealistic mode is both a reflection of the contemporary American society and its members (depicted in their private as well as social lives) which in turn helps push the reader away from indifference toward a state of involvement. This also makes it possible for depicting characters as having a more mature appreciation of each other after their initial judgmental and obsessed attitudes.<sup>v</sup> Careful reading of *The Corrections*, then, uncovers a subtle oxymoron: consciousness gained here is the consciousness resulted from humanistic retrospection and ethics in a deterministic context of cosmic irony of the Midwest (i.e. the characters and the Midwest are set in both a syntagmatic and paradigmatic relationship implying that the individual is not only an object located in a context but also a subject with a varying degree of independence best exemplified in characters' simultaneous lack of control and will to power, and in their at-times-complete exhaustion and also determination).

Franzen's portrayal of the geographical place and its inhabitants is reminiscent of the complexity of human relationships and the ethics of recognition latent in them. As a figure, the place sometimes suffers (the image of rape in *Strong Motion* and the image of decay in *The Twenty-Seventh City* and *Freedom*), judges (the image of superego in *The Corrections* and *The Twenty-Seventh City's* policing policy and aggressive propaganda), and needs care (as in *Freedom* and *The Corrections*). There are several instances in which St. Jude is identical with parents, especially the father figure, while the expanding frontiers are identical with newer generations wanting to get themselves rid of the burden of the (communal and individual) past. Therefore, the Midwest is not merely a deterministic force, but a considerably serious and influential entity housing different generations and races while it is also where the atmosphere of conspiracy and insecurity is so powerful that it haunts all the residents:

A CENTURY OF AUTOMOTIVE SAFETY. Block after block of taxing text. What Gary hated most about the Midwest was how unpampered and unprivileged he felt in it. St. Jude in its optimistic egalitarianism consistently failed to accord him the respect to which his gifts and attainments entitled him. (p. 175)

However, at the same time St Jude is "the nicest place" (p. 176).

In *The Corrections*, Franzen deliberately presents iconic places (i.e. the Midwest and the Eastern Bloc). Topology here does not function as a mere background but an existence and an embodiment to activate or deactivate certain perceptions. He employs situatedness in both naturalistic and cognitive aspects implying determinism and consciousness, respectively. If traditional naturalism precludes consciousness and implies determinism under the influence of heredity and environment, Franzen's neorealism puts emphasis on a certain location with simultaneously universal and timeless scopes (i.e. America as the emblem of capitalism, universalism, and neoliberalism vs. the Eastern Bloc as a modernized center of chaos) and highlights the restricting effect of spatiotemporal dimensions; it thus presents the Midwest as a place where its residents can leave behind and rethink its conditions but can never liberate themselves from it. Almost all members of the family, especially the children (Gary, Chip, and Denise), leave St. Jude at least for a while; however, by the end of the novel all of them have to return to it to celebrate Christmas at *home*. This is because, no matter how debilitating St. Jude/home is, it is still the last resort for the wandering Lamberts from the inhumane and lonely life they have experienced. Franzen skillfully displays how "[h]uman lives are a dialectical movement between shelter and venture, attachment and freedom"<sup>vi</sup> (Tuan, in González, 2015, p. 14). Accordingly, characters sometimes need to move away to be 'free' and to face something beyond mere social obstacles and familial belonging. Moving from America to Eastern Europe, now considered to be a new kind of wilderness,<sup>vii</sup> can be justified not only in terms of capitalism's expansionism but also as a kind of retrospection, a movement from the Garden of Eden to the Wilderness where feelings and human beings are cruder and less bounded. This makes the Midwest (*home*) oscillate between its positive image – where one belongs and feels safe ("I'm a Midwesterner. I'd be *lost* in Philadelphia" (Franzen, 2001, p. 63)) – and its oppressive form, analogues to the figures of authority capable of separating and affecting individuals, as seen in the following extract.

His parents were cowed by authority of all kinds. When Gary wanted to reassure himself that he'd escaped their fate, when he needed to measure his distance from St. Jude, he considered his own fearlessness in the face of authority. (p. 149)

Elsewhere, Franzen ironically uses the term *naturally* meaning both genetic and environmental determinism on the one hand, and ethics, on the other: “just because they were good St. Jude kids who *naturally* took an interest in other people” (p. 117; emphasis added).

Franzen’s modified version of realism requires him to emphasize a strong and detailed sense of locatedness in terms of time and place. To do so, not only does he provide his audience with detailed descriptions of the setting, but also uses a familiar place, though with a fictional name, in the contemporary era. His Midwest, beyond a mere name, depicts different “value codes” of the “middle-class ethos” (Poole, 2007, p. 271). However, it seems that behind some simplistically depicted codes, abrupt solutions and dénouements, and melodramatic turns in his works, Franzen has located something much deeper. He dexterously makes use of his readers’ different schemata to endow them with certain habitual responses so that later on he can shatter them. This is a kind of teleological game Franzen as a postmodern realist plays with his readers to mingle their pre-understanding and stored inputs about the Midwest with modifications and ‘corrections.’ Accordingly, the resulting ethical and cognitive judgments strengthening each other lead to a different version of judgment, one related to Franzen’s particular pragmatism (unlike postmodernists’ blank irony) which brings aesthetics and pragmatism together. This is why it is not possible to limit the reading of *The Corrections* to a symbolic level. The novel’s Midwest is a real place, not just a deterministic power. Alfred Lambert is not simply a dying patriarch or a symbol of American Dream, nor is Enid Lambert a sheer emblem of a pathetic creature or mad-woman-under-attic type; neither is Chip merely a desolate artist. They are Midwesterners and multidimensional ordinary people who cannot be described in a few lines. For Franzen, it is not enough to merely rely on expectations and generalizations but a deeper appreciation through pensive involvement and interpretive reflections fuelled by surprises and disrupted default assumptions is urgent. Similarly, Franzen’s characters are also urged to make revisions, visit different kinds of people from different classes, get involved in unsuccessful romances and acknowledge true complexity through experiencing a life inside and outside the Midwest/family. Franzen’s readers along with his characters are permitted to leave the Midwest, to cross the borders; and like his character-initiators go on uncompleted but cognitively and ethically fruitful quests. In almost all these quests, the individual oscillates between two domains: the birthplace and a new destination. Place or environment in *The Corrections* is not merely a limiting agent preventing human beings from taking measures or actions. Admittedly, St. Jude/ the Midwest, for which Alfred Lambert, the strict father of the family, stands metaphorically, is undeniably considerably powerful; it is a debilitating superego and a figure capable of taking punitive measures and haunting the mind of its residents. However, this is not all. Since each place provides its residents with spatial schemas, Lamberts’ three children who are at least allowed to cross the geographical borders are provided with different conceptual frameworks as well. As Kristiansen (2006), quoting Fauconnier, explains, “mental spaces”

can be thought of as temporary containers for relevant information about a particular domain [...] Frames are hierarchically structured attribute-value pairs that can either be integrated with perceptual information, or used to activate generic knowledge about people and objects assumed by default. (p. 189)

In the case of the novel under discussion, it is always after such trips that decisions are made. That is, the change in spatial schemas modifies the way the characters look at things. It is after his trip to Lithuania that Chip learns that there is no point in writing a thriller and decides to write a farce instead (Franzen, 2001, p. 534), or coming back home, Denise learns to stop “pass[ing] for a perfectly responsible and careful daughter” (p. 522).

## “EPISTEMIC IMBALANCE:” ETHICS REVIVED IN THE COMPLEXITY OF “THE OTHER”

Although the name ‘Midwest’ can imply balance and equilibrium, as soon as a character leaves the place, he/she is plighted with doubts about its traditions and values best embodied in Enid and Alfred. Going beyond the *borders* through quests is not to highlight romantic/heroic deeds but to highlight the attempt made by each character to gain a partial mental/financial independence. The Lamberts, containing two Midwestern generations, are torn between modernity and tradition: Alfred, an engineer with a manual occupation and his children with a different mentality show the discrepancy between an agrarian background and the expansion of cities: a movement from the natural towards the artificial. These differences, as the main source of the characters’ internal and external tensions, are later on *tolerated* as a source of complexity and knowledge. To Franzen, the Midwest, is also where the inhabitants “can moderate between the extreme [and] can see both sides of the argument” (Poole, 2007, p. 266). Being a Midwesterner, thus, can simultaneously contribute to citizens’ pride and guilt complex, especially when they want to leave the place or want to be different. This can tell us why the word guilt – recurring in all Franzen’s works – triggers both social and personal dimensions and causes a sense of imposition as well as responsibility capable of strengthening characters’ relationships and acceptance of each other’s ethics.<sup>viii</sup> The writer sketches the life of individuals in a familiar and multifarious environment showing the multifariousness of life itself which can both paralyze and rekindle one’s critical thinking. This is how characters cannot easily decide to stay or to depart, to love or to hate, and to stay alone or to live with *others*. Franzen, consequently, presents how interrelated the individual and his surroundings are. Thanks to neorealism, he knows “mental functioning cannot be understood merely by analyzing what goes on within the skull but can only be fully comprehended once it has been seen in its social and physical context” (Palmer, 2010, p. 43). The numerous mentions of existentialist thinkers and allusions to Hamlet and tragic heroes on the one hand, plus the detailed description of the social milieu of his fiction, on the other, clearly indicate that Franzen’s “perspective on the mind” is both “internalist” and “externalist” (p. 39). This leads to the replacement of traditional heroes with ordinary people highlighting the ethics of ordinariness. This is why Chip

purged the Marxists from his bookshelves [...] Jürgen Habermas’s *Reason and the Rationalization of Society*, which he’d found too difficult to read, let alone annotate, was in mint condition [...] But Jürgen Habermas didn’t have Julia’s long, cool, pear-tree limbs, Theodor Adorno didn’t have Julia’s grapy smell of lecherous pliability, Fred Jameson didn’t have Julia’s artful tongue [...] [he] sold his feminists, his formalists, his structuralists, his poststructuralists, his Freudians, and his queers . . . he piled his Foucault and Greenblatt and hooks and Poovey into shopping bags and sold them all.

(Franzen, 2001, p. 92)

It is in this return to life, corporality, and everyday reality that reason and rationalization of an ordinary man can replace jaw-breaking ideas which are “too difficult” and too detached to be understood because emphatic relationship results from understanding which itself is attainable through removing the mask of sophistication and intellectualism (Burn, 2008, p.120). Alfred Lambert’s children’s return to the Midwest and their attempt to refurbish the ramshackle house can be the celebration of the ethics of coexistence and tolerance.

Not totally refuting the naturalistic conception of environmental determinism, Franzen prefers *situated consciousness* with an equivocal implication. The notion of place or situatedness can trigger both familiarity and alienation. Familiarity can help people function

better and be more focused and oriented. Awareness of this cognitive fact in *The Corrections* is delicate and gradual. Franzen's characters and other individuals become painfully aware that, to put it into Palmer's terminology, "consciousness never gravitates toward itself but is always found in intense relationship with another consciousness" (2010, p. 164). Franzen presents characters entangled in a network of relationships embodied in the form of family, geographical locatedness, and communal dependencies. Displaying the negative side of situatedness, he depicts his characters – engaged in half-hearted- or pseudo-quests – as alienated from their habitat.<sup>ix</sup> Palmer quotes Daniel Dennett on this: "Taking [people] out of their homes is literally separating them from large parts of their minds"<sup>x</sup> (p. 171). That is, leaving one's habitat means being cut off from a large part of what has long been taken for granted. Leaving the Midwest, characters attempt to replace habits with *attitudes* – a term with a higher cognitive load – no matter how successful or unsuccessful they are. Therefore, at the same time that Franzen depicts a caricature of a family, of a group of individuals being in a state of departure, belonging and aloofness, and judgment, he also shows characters struggling through the normalized and standardized truths and socio-existential ones to have a more ethical form of existence. Here is where the personal and the communal do not seem to reconcile at first.<sup>xi</sup>

Thanks to neorealism, in *The Corrections*, Franzen succeeds in creating characters in a multilayered set of relationships so that success or failure in one affects the other of a different scope (i.e. social, familial, or personal). Franzen skillfully pictures these parallels in the social and private lives of his characters. His microcosm of family presented in the detailed context of the Midwest's values, norms, and impositions triggers contradictory states of feeling and cognition causing characters' indeterminacies, sense of guilt and responsibility, and even their seeking refuge in a different place other than the Midwest. This makes the absolute dichotomy between society and the individual long practiced by postmodernism, naturalism, and even realism seem oversimplistic since there is always a degree of consciousness and dialectic for the family members concretized in different decision-making moments, performing deliberate antisocial and anti-patriarchal activities (e.g. Denise's and Chip's sexual perversion and Alfred's abstention from eating and his subsequent suicide), and even in their regrets.<sup>xii</sup> Thus, the subject-object dyad of society-person relationship is questioned. Hence, the novel which initially seems to be "obscure enough and simple enough to be mistaken for" an easily accessible novel is one with an ethical mission (Franzen, 2001, p. 36).

In *The Corrections*, the ethics of *otherness* can thus be achieved in the moments of surprise and transformation. As mentioned, through presenting the characters' and readers' "prototype schemas" (Palmer, 2010, p. 197) and the apparently-handly stereotypes about society and other people the individuals make generalizations which could be called to be over-reliant on their schematized repertoire. Challenging these schemas, Franzen makes use of the "epistemic imbalance" (p. 208) through characters' misunderstandings, disappointments, and misjudgments found in their presuppositions they have made about *the other*. These disruptions are evident in the solitary confessions characters make to themselves. For example, Denise modifies the image she has constructed about Alfred in her mind when she knows how he has kept her secret for so many years or when Alfred talking to his 'Turd' learns about his vanity. All these moments, despite questioning characters' habits and cognitive passivism, add to a great deal to their humanity and understandability.

### MEMORIES, RETROSPECTION, AND ETHICS OF RECOGNITION

To achieve his version of realism, Franzen juxtaposes the notion of contemporaneity in the form of a paralyzing hereness and uselessness of syntagmatic departures characters

experience in their careers (Gary is a banker, Denise is an international chef, and Chip is a playwright and university professor in the American metropolitan cities) and trips (usually to a European country) with the paradigmatic Bergsonian concept of time in which every moment is lived and the burden of the past adds to substantiality<sup>xiii</sup> and ethics. Along with their immersion in the here and now and their struggle to survive, the Lamberts can never get themselves rid of their memories. One of the best examples here is the letters carved by Don Armour beneath Alfred's chair which he cannot separate himself from: "The chair was a monument and a symbol and could not be parted from Alfred" (2001, p. 10). In *The Corrections*, the past is not merely something which has happened and finished but what affects the present. At issue are traumas which are agonizing but can invoke empathy too. Putting different parts of the puzzle together, the characters become aware of the causes of their family members' behavior. Thus they come to a new level of ethics. Unlike postmodern contemporaneity, in Franzen's recourse to neorealism in *The Corrections* the substantiality of the self is summoned in relation with time and place, in memories and future plans reminiscent of characters' humanness. Besides, as Burn claims, despite depicting a dark and tragic realism, mainly through his choice of *Bildungsroman* (a novel which focuses on temporality and spatiality) rather than merely adhering to "spatial form," Franzen withstands the notion of contemporaneity and timelessness induced by the late-capitalistic context embodied in vicious circles which characters are trapped in (p. 62).

As Americans and Midwesterners, the Lamberts are also obsessed with the myth/curse of *Americanness*. It seems that this deep sense of dividedness – rooted in characters and Franzen himself, as he admits in "Meet Me in St Louis" – contributes to the formation of "the distortions in the construction of individual identity" (Palmer, 2010, p. 92). In *The Corrections*, generations search for perfection and "omnicompetence"<sup>xiv</sup> – embodied in different ways (in Denise's attempt to become a perfect chef, in Alfred's puritanical attitudes, and in Chip's rewritings of his play) – to fulfill the imposed requirements of the myth. The resulting angst makes them leave the Midwest. Although there are many authors, like Henry James, who seminally incorporate patterns of departures and returns in their fiction, in Franzen, arguably, these departures are not only to create some space between characters and the system but also to give them an opportunity to rearrange the forgotten stretches of time to arrive at a deeper understanding of other characters and their real motives. In this sense, Franzen does not merely want to confront one place with another in a symbolic way but to explore the cognitive alterations of individuals in these spatial and temporal arrivals and departures.

Like characters presented in naturalistic genres, Franzen's characters are also affected by place and time, in particular by their past. There are numerous moments when a trivial event triggers a traumatic experience in the past. Enid's Christmas invitation leaves her children with their dark memories and makes them anxious about homecoming. However, this does not mean that deterministic forces do not let them think or make decisions, for (re)cognition<sup>xv</sup> itself is always related to spatiotemporal dimensions. Characters leave their birthplace, even though not permanently, and once they are away from their families and the Midwest, their past, in the form of memories, looms larger and, cognitively speaking, helps them make revisions. Thus, all those abstractions and hatred, or even love, in this process of *retrospective questioning* make sense and become humanized. The by-gones, then, are not nostalgic but omnipresent replacing liquidity with substantiality. This pushes characters towards their home, society, and relatives which they do not know whether to flee from or return to. The process of give and take is always there, between characters and their surroundings, between now and then, and hence between determinism and cognition creating "multiple drafts" rather than dualistic worldviews (Burn, 2008, p.114). Through these spatiotemporal links, Franzen-replaces the abstract with the concrete<sup>xvi</sup> and shows that there is



no single center of consciousness or irrevocably deterministic power. For him, identity is not something fixed, monolithic, or predetermined, formed in a vacuum but a continually dynamic entity in “flux” implying that “the self rewrites itself” (p. 114) in real exposures with ordinariness and ordinary people. Franzen chooses neorealism at the end of the twentieth century because it facilitates the author’s movement from individualism towards community analogously shown in the characters’ homecoming though this happens at Christmas and in winter when death and birth meet.

This neorealism genre provides Franzen with a milieu to present characters in society as “‘net’ people” (Burn, 2008, p.54) with *potentials* for change and mutual understanding. Despite the existentialist motifs of the novel, embodied in the individuals’ strives and sufferings and Alfred Lambert’s frequently quoting existential philosophers like Schopenhauer, Franzen *situates* individuals in society; the Lambert family becomes a microcosm reflecting what is happening outside. So *The Corrections* does not retreat “from the challenge of the politically engaged and genuinely exploratory social novel” to seek refuge in the narrower confines of “individual crises” (Green, 2005, p. 188), existentialism, and stoicism. The ‘corrections’ Franzen depicts are more constructive than destructively rebellious and this may account for the reason why unlike what we expect from novels, characters here move from radicalism towards conservatism or more mature reactions. Croluis’ topic of lecture “Surviving the Corrections” (2001, p. 332) can be interpreted as an attempt made by characters to survive “the mega ruins in micro times” (p. 383). The time when “any meaningful distinction between private and public sectors had disappeared” (p. 441). This survival is not through characters’ rudimentary transformation but through their hesitant returns to values, slightly modified attitudes, and uncertainties. The uncertainties and tensions prevalent in the novel and different levels of communications make the individual hesitate about arriving at a verdict about *others*. To achieve these ‘corrective’ and punitive measures, characters are not stable but are depicted as disoriented creatures zigzagging between sympathy and antipathy. This could in part come from neorealism which provides Franzen with a chance to pay due attention to all characters and their development in time. What Franzen presents is a *Bildungsroman* of “micro-collectives” (Franzen, 2016, p. 30) rather than one about a single invincible hero or person, and accordingly, he subtly shows how all the major characters continually position and reposition themselves and their attitudes towards the people other than themselves.

In *The Corrections*, therefore, the realistic and naturalistic novels’ presentation of a single actualized ontological and epistemological world is replaced with Franzen’s complex depiction of ontological uncertainties which encourage other possibilities and readers’ *active* cognitive involvement through undermining their expectations formed based on their preexisting schemata (Phelan, 2009, pp. 29-30). Franzen’s neorealism by no means negates the concept of suffocating situation of neocapitalism reflected by many postmodern writers; however, it seems that through his preference to show the complexity of human relationships and lives, Franzen can talk of individuals’ grandeur in a social context. In doing so, Franzen makes *The Corrections* a venue for illustrating ethics based on complex interrelationships. His fiction limns characters of a dysfunctional family who realize that it is time for them to stop condemning others for victimizing them, to stop seeing the issues in black and white, to appreciate virtues in the development of interrelationships and to feel responsible for their mistakes.<sup>xvii</sup> Franzen’s notion of tragic realism, emphasizing the painful process of ethical maturity, negates the simplistic notions of superficial optimism as well as determinism. It shows the complexity of his characters in their movement from a symbolic and two-dimensional pole towards the mimetic pole (character as person) (Phelan, 2009, pp. 29-30) in the course of the novel. The movement itself results from proper (mutual) understanding rather than adherence to an idealistic version of *the other* made in the mind of each character.

As Dannenberg (2008) explains: “Recognition [...] involves the discovery of an additional identity or character relationships as opposed to the fundamental recognition of identity in the coincidental encounter” (p. 98). Recognition and acceptance of characters’ humanity cause more disturbance and confusions as they trigger different emotional states leading to responsibility and pang of conscience in other characters. It is in one of these dramatic moments that Denise suddenly becomes aware of her father’s grandeur and her own ignorance. When she discovers that her father, knowing about her affair with the company’s employee working under him, decided to sacrifice his position and promotion, she learns that things are much more complicated than her ironic prediction of how the table is set at home or her mother letting her into the house using the same repetitious words.

As mentioned, in *The Corrections*, characters’ zigzag from radicalism to conservatism which is different from the typical movement of the typical protagonists from a state of compliance to that of disobedience. The characters’ uncertainties regarding disobedience or reunion (e.g. the Lamberts’ reunion in *St Jude* for Christmas on Enid’s request and the children’s ethical dilemma of ignoring or fulfilling her final wish) not only have deepened their humanity but also indicate that the relationship between individuals and different social units is considerably more complex than it may appear. In *The Corrections*, Franzen cruelly lets individuals be beguiled and suffer while they are torn between self and family/society. Perhaps this is why Carroll blames Franzen believing that the novel’s “moral and emotional dichotomy” and Franzen’s dilemma of authority and responsibility have led to nothing but tension and implausibility (pp. 95-96). While this is mainly attributable to Franzen’s ironic depiction of society, his humanistic undertones, and Darwinism in the form of rivalry evident even in the relationship of siblings, it also reflects his work’s complexity as well as the complexity of the real human relationships often disregarded in realistic, naturalistic, and even postmodern novels. As Burn notes, Franzen’s novel addresses “the idea of a real world beyond the problem raised by nonreferential systems of discourse” (p. 21). *The Corrections* as a novel of relationships shows the major characters’ needs to redefine their relationship with other people as well as the system they are working for or harassed by. Although, at the end of the novel, nothing is resolved but Alfred’s crisis with his suicide, characters achieve a considerably better understanding of each other. If in the earlier parts of the novel, everything is empty and characters are aloof and lonely (“THE MADNESS of an autumn prairie cold front coming through[....] No children in the yards here [...] Storm windows shuddered in the empty bedrooms” (Franzen, 2001, p. 3)), the last pages, despite Alfred’s painful but still heroic death, show a different and warmer picture: “when she’d pressed her lips to his forehead and walked out with Denise and Gary into the warm spring night, she felt that nothing could kill her hope now, nothing” (p. 566). *The Corrections*, thus, is the transcendence of the ordinary (of Alfred and his ordinary family), one different from idealistic transcendentalism, “to establish intriguing dialectics between a discourse of dehumanization and a nostalgia for more traditional forms of identity” (p. 335). Franzen, thus, accomplishes his moral mission as an author; in the face of rampant universalism, he calls for a new kind of realism and naturalism based on locatedness, multileveled relationships, and prejudice to revive hopes in the possibility of *the other’s* ethics despite his confirming the fact that environment and nature can have deterministic and demoralizing effects on people.

Finally, neorealism gives Franzen an opportunity to draw on different fields to depict “social crisis” registered in a “domestic setting” (Green, 2005, p. 91). For our discussion, Franzen’s introduction of “family ecosystem” (Franzen, 2001, p. 176), and a complex mosaic of micro and macro levels in his works can contribute illuminating insights into such matters as myriad layers of interaction of *intermind* and *intramind*.<sup>xviii</sup> Franzen presents a family’s generation gap, obsessions, failures, discrepancies, and changing values in their ramshackle

house in St. Jude analogous to American society. The deeply detailed story of each member's life shows how they, suffering long periods of distress, hatred, misunderstanding, and impotence, reluctantly come back home to refurbish it. The notion of change and dynamism used – questioned by naturalistic determinism – is best embodied in characters' undergoing painful (pseudo-)transformations and internal conflicts. Here is where Franzen lets individuals explore the possibility of liberation of ego (his main concern in his essays and novels) in the Midwest – a community located in the cosmopolitan American society, which is, in turn, stuck in the universally homogenizing policies made by “info-sphere” (Berardi, 2009, pp. 39-43) of post-postmodernism. Franzen, as he points out in several essays, intends to seek philosophical and liberating discomfort produced in the long-forgotten “private spaces,” not in the “therapeutic optimism” resulting from disappointing and ineffectual postmodern non-human and symbolic spheres (Franzen, 2002, p. 78). Franzen's version of tragic realism has contradictorily brought together naturalistic and behavioristic implications and ethics. The result is a double and contradictory expression of change. On the one hand, characters are stuck in the timelessness induced through society, best presented in their repetitious actions and circular movements, while, on the other, they at least show slight changes of mood and attitude in terms of humanistic and ethical values which in turn present a glimpse of hope in the form of a weak but rekindling internal dynamism. Franzen tends to reconcile individuals with situatedness, prejudice (vs. indifference), belonging and “finitude of human existence,” a “being-in-the-world,” to redeem himself, his audiences, and his characters from liquidation induced through *liquid identity*<sup>xix</sup> and non-belonging. Thus, he could ask for “effective historical consciousness,” to use Gadamer's term (Holub, 2008, p. 269). Here is where *substantiality* is reclaimed and situatedness will cause (mutual) understanding. This is why, despite its pessimistic tone, *The Corrections* is replete with moments of “deciding, wanting, and regretting” which, in Palmer's account of the sociality of the human mind, exemplify “the mental events and states that provide the causal network behind the physical events” (2010, p. 222) reminiscent of the existence and being of the individual (readers and characters). This is how Franzen provokes the individuals into entering the process of “regressive questioning” (p. 228) in search for the main cause of their plights rather than the mere suffering they are obsessed with. This seems to be what characters generally reach at the end of the novel although the answer provided by Franzen in the form of the characters' final melodramatic rejoin seems to be superficial, this stupid hopefulness may be the only solution. Although characters are ordinary people living as typical Midwesterners, Franzen's allusion to classical tragedies like *Hamlet* and his numerous mentions of existentialist thinkers like Schopenhauer imply that in the face of all the external controlling forces debilitating human being and his pride, he is in search of reality with all its complexities not depression *per se*. In the deeper layers of the narrative, it is possible to locate a special kind of hope and fear best attainable in Franzen's simultaneous use of neorealism along with its emphasis on time and place, and also in his detailed presentation of characters tortured in a state of mixed feelings ranging from hatred to love, from threat to security, and from departure to arrival.

## CONCLUSION

Franzen distinguishes two models for novels: Status model and Contract model. The first group includes canons and great works of art while the second group “represents a compact” number of novels and “entails a balancing of self-expression and communication within a group” (Franzen, 2002, p. 240). While for the first group, difficulty *per se* is important; in the case of the latter value is the ability to induce serious thought. Here, as a careful reading of *The Corrections* suggests, pleasure painfully arises from experience. The novel shows how

abstractions and negative prejudice move towards concrete and *situated consciousness*, achieved in the characters' human-scaled quests and experiences like being sacked, falling in love, suffering, and even betrayals. Even the names of characters in Franzen's fiction indicate this situatedness and locatedness or the relationship between person and place, between intermind and intramind.<sup>xx</sup> This is one reason Adam Begley classifies Franzen as a member of "the everything-is-connected school of fiction" (Burn, 2008, p. 108). It is mainly due to his choice of neorealism that Franzen can pay due homage to multidimensionality and depth of ordinary but simultaneously complicated issues and make his characters as well as the reader appreciate the ethics of *otherness* in tangible quotidian issues.

Living in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, Franzen is well-aware of the problems besetting literature and society. He is conscious of these needs and asserts: "For every person who has a need, there's a person, somewhere, who wants to take care of that need" which makes it "*necessary to suffer*" (2007, p. 484). He believes in sharing suffering with other fellow-creatures, in replacing misanthropy with philanthropy through replacing judgmental prejudice with ethics and (re)cognition. His characters' guilt complex, their interrelationships, their sense of being torn between their own passions and others' preferences are all examples of oscillations between these two poles. For Franzen, understanding and communication are as important as self-expression and should be kept alive in society. "All of a sudden he understood why nobody, including himself, had ever liked his screenplay: he'd written a thriller where he should have written farce," we read about Chip in *The Corrections* (p. 534). This is Franzen expressing why comedy and tragedy like life itself coexist.

Drawing on his naturalist and realist predecessors, Franzen writes a conventional novel highlighting the importance of "characterization, [...] of traditional plots (family crises, coming-of-age stories, and so on)," [and of] "resolution rather than indeterminacy" (Burn, 2008, p. 49). Admittedly, there are numerous Foucauldian elements in his works; however, there is also a gleam of slender hope obtained through ethics, emotion and, above all, (re)cognition. This may explain why in *The Corrections* initial depictions and descriptions encouraging aloofness and judgment gradually transform into empathy enhancing the sense of identification and affection. Here is where both readers and characters are to discard the initial negative prejudice and try to acquire more mature-but-still-contextual attitudes, as for Franzen nothing happens in a vacuum. To Franzen, the existence of an individual is defined in his connections, decisions, and sufferings since basically it is impossible to separate intermind and intramind, and since (re)cognition entails relationship, contradiction, opposition, and dilemma. This can explain why after depicting the lonely life of each character and the aftermath of this loneliness, Franzen brings them together at Christmas (the moment of (re)birth). As long as characters have not decided to replace their old habits, to *temporarily* move away from the Midwest, to change their career, and to finally come back home, they cannot be ethical creatures as (re)cognition is interwoven with involvement and disengagement, empathy and vicarious pleasure, suffering or satisfaction.

Franzen knows that in (post-)postmodernism "the mass media translates political and social movements into simple images that can be consumed by the public in a safe and reaffirming way" (Samuels, 2009, p. 66). He witnesses how posthumanistic virtual spheres and individuals with "virtual identities" (p. 66) mark a condition in which the novel is depleted of humanistic values, subjectivity, communication, constructive speculation, and meaning. In a world of pessimism, World Wide Web, and non-belonging, Franzen, along with a group of theorists and authors, have decided to cling to the hope that the *waning ego* and faith of the postmodern novel can be revived through a new version of realism and spiritualism. To stand against both the traditional forms of idealism and the alienating technological environment, he prefers to "look banal or melodramatic or naïve or sappy, and

to ask the reader really to feel something” (quoted in Giles, 2007, p. 323) than to leave the individual with *blank irony* and ontological uncertainties. Novel in this regard can be a venue to enjoy the dialectic of authority and marginality, aesthetics and influence as well as a return to ethics and philanthropy. When, in *Strong Motion*, Franzen satirically points out that “Americans are wanted and required irresponsible” (p. 273), he calls for social responsibility and action in the face of passive resistance and intellectually-masked inaction. Problems of society, he avers, are too deep and complicated to be dealt with superficially and optimistically; he disparages “therapeutic optimism” of *symptom novels*. The problem with our novel is that it is thought of as “a medicine” (p. 73), Franzen contends in *How to Be Alone*. Social novels, he continues, should deal with “manners,” with “mystery” (p. 71), and responsibility. It should be a venue where conflicts, dilemmas, and challenges of ordinary people are genuinely presented and thought about – where ethics is rekindled.

#### END NOTES

<sup>i</sup> The term has been used in painting, cinema, philosophy, and art (e.g. literature). In this context the term refers to a modified version of realism; however, it is also a synonym for “tragic realism” – a term used by Franzen as opposed to the depressive styles of his contemporary writers as well as the depthless optimistic attitudes adopted by some authors.

<sup>ii</sup> The term has been used by Nilges in “Neoliberalism and the Time of the Novel.” He considers “omnipresent contemporaneity” and “immediacy” as two paralyzing factors which lead to and result from neoliberalism’s induced “systemic stupidity” (p. 369).

<sup>iii</sup> This initial version of prejudice and partiality is at odds with Gadamer’s intended prejudice. Although the very idea of novel writing implies being prejudiced since “narratives are not just sequences of events [...] It has always been acknowledged that storytelling, whether claimed to be fictional or not, is a selective and partial method of representation” (Page & Thomas, 2011, p. 10), the prejudice preliminary intended is negative prejudice here.

<sup>iv</sup> See essays like “Why Bother” and “Mr. Difficult.”

<sup>v</sup> Palmer considers the characters’ understanding or misunderstanding of each other as doubly embedded narratives.

<sup>vi</sup> Thinkers like Michel de Certeau and David Harvey, Edward Casey, Edward W. Soja and Doreen Massey have studied the relationship between place and space.

<sup>vii</sup> “Franzen turns the Eastern wilderness into a mirror of the repressed darkness *within* the Western travelers.” (Ladegaard, 2015, p. 41)

<sup>viii</sup> Martha C. Nussbaum in “Danger to Human Dignity: The Revival of Disgust and Shame in the Law” discusses such issues. While guilt is believed to be a sense of failure in social, familial, and ethical duties, the latter has a more personal dimension.

<sup>ix</sup> Note that the word *habit* connotes a sense of simultaneity and lack of consciousness and, at the same time, a shelter.

<sup>x</sup> The notion of familiarity can also be applied to readers’ habitual reading. Franzen emphasizes the role of the serious reader versus the resistant reader as a “social isolate” (Franzen, 2002, p. 77) not a “modeled-habit” (p. 84), who carries with him different “fields of perception” (p. 83). He wants his characters to move away from modeled characterization and his novel to swerve from the familiar genres satisfying readers’ presuppositions; however, this does not mean that like his fellow contemporary writers, he deliberately tries to almost completely disappoint and interrupt them utilizing art-for-art sake or art-for-disengagement/discomfort-sake works.

<sup>xi</sup> “Franzen’s readers too are given the task to weigh and compare alternate or even opposing versions of truth and reality” (Poole, 2007, p. 281).

<sup>xii</sup> The famous supper scene Chip is obsessed with, Alfred’s making Chip stay at the table until he finishes the food he dislikes or the details about Enid and Alfred’s peculiar sexual relationship that Enid remembers, or even the dress code which makes Denise self-conscious are all examples of such norms. Interestingly, however, in all these cases the victim/object knows how to outwit the authority.

<sup>xiii</sup> Substantiality is one of the substantial issues discussed by Franzen in “Why Bother” (2002). He objects to the lack of substantial authors, readers, novels, and even “imaginary worlds” (p. 75) in postmodern works.

<sup>xiv</sup> Aminzade (2014) uses the term believing that Franzen’s narrator in *The Corrections* is “hyper-informed” (p. 237) and his characters modeled on the narrator are also obsessed with perfection.

<sup>xv</sup> As '(re)cognition' can imply self-centeredness and other-centeredness, it could be a more useful term than 'cognition' in this text. It is also a more illuminating term in that the text is essentially concerned with the ethics of otherness.

<sup>xvi</sup> In the course of the novel this departure becomes more evident, especially in Franzen's detailed descriptions of foods made by Denise and Chip's selling of his books and his quitting of teaching.

<sup>xvii</sup> "He [Joey] was the person who's handled his own shit to get his wedding ring back. This wasn't the person he'd thought he was, or would have been 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 contradictory potential someones" (Franzen, 2010, p. 459).

<sup>xviii</sup> Palmer believes intermental thought "is joint, group, shared, or collective thought, as opposed to intramental, or private, individual thought" (2010, p. 4). This can also be related to "characters' private worlds' interactions and their intrafamilial and extrafamilial conflicts" (Amani, Pirnajmuddin & Marandi, 2017, p. 69).

<sup>xix</sup> The term 'liquid' is Zigmunt Bauman's catchword repeated in almost all his works to refer to postmodernism/modernity and its effect on people's identity and behavior.

<sup>xx</sup> For instance, in *The Twenty-Seventh City*, Jammu is the name of a north Indian state as well as that of the villainess/heroin; this is also the case with Louis and St Louis in *Strong Motion*.

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