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Deposited on: 18 February 2019
Responsible Individualism and *Mauvaise Foi* in *Middlemarch* and *Freedom*

Jonathan Franzen has proved a central point of reference in discussions about literature after postmodernism. Thanks to his popularity and the force of his critical pronouncements, he has also enjoyed a unique prominence in conversations about contemporary realism. In this respect Charles Dickens has proved a salient comparator; the Aristotelian dictum of probable impossibilities is pertinent to both as they seek to depict social truths through a mixture of naturalistic psychology and complex emplotments bordering on the impossible. In this essay however, I turn to George Eliot and her 1871-2 novel *Middlemarch* as a point of comparison. Of specific interest to me is Franzen’s overlooked commitment to literature as a morally instructive force, and the authors’ shared strategy for promulgating a vision of responsible and proximally existential subjecthood. This strategy – the narrative technique of *mauvaise foi* common to *Middlemarch* and to Franzen’s 1996 novel *Freedom* – points to a shared vision of agency in an increasingly individualistic and atomised world. From a narratological perspective, it also illuminates an important point of difference between Franzen and the coterie of either postmodernist, or post-postmodernist authors, with whom he is regularly compared.

**Worthy Occupation**

They are rid of the Christian God and now believe all the more firmly that they must cling to Christian morality [...] We do not wish to hold it against little moralistic females à la Eliot. In England one must rehabilitate oneself after every little emancipation from theology by showing in a veritably awe-inspiring manner what a moral fanatic one is.

Friedrich Nietzsche (Nietzsche 1990: 202)

Marriage, which was to bring guidance into worthy imperative occupation, had not yet freed her from the gentlewoman’s oppressive liberty.

George Eliot (Eliot 2009: 288)

There’s something wrong with me [...] they’re all one kind of person and I’m another kind of person. More competitive and selfish. Less good, basically.

Jonathan Franzen (Franzen 2010: 74-5)

Charges of moralism and didacticism are commonplace in George Eliot’s vast reception history. At the close of the nineteenth century, Henry James remarked of how ‘the philosophical door is always open on her stage, and we are aware that the somewhat cooling draught of ethical purpose draws across’ (James 1888: 51). This perception endured well into the late twentieth century, with summations such as Robert Coles’, for whom Eliot was ‘a moralist first, a romancer later’. As a woman writing under a male pseudonym, and as a convert from Evangelicalism to secular philosophy, Mary Ann Evan’s was understandably preoccupied with questions of moral legitimacy and personal liberty. Awkwardly for Nietzsche, the moral universe she developed owed nearly as
much to European metaphysics as it did to British rationalism or empiricism. Two significant influences in this regard were the radical philosophies of Feuerbach and Spinoza, both of whom she translated authoritatively and both of whom rejected classical metaphysical accounts of God whilst placing moral emphasis upon concrete and embodied relations. Eliot’s pluralism in this respect puts paid to the image of the narrow fanatic for whom solutions depended on the pursuit of a unified doctrine. On the contrary, her moral outlook radiated from a commitment to free will and individual agency quite removed from the homespun utilitarianism for which Nietzsche maligned her. Indeed, Eliot’s greatest novel *Middlemarch* presents a rejection of just those ideals.

The novel’s heroine Dorothea Brooke is regularly condemned for her saccharine virtue, and yet from the narrative perspective of *Middlemarch* itself, Dorothea’s inexperienced piety and her fledgling idealism is the source of much unhappiness. The austere misery of her first marriage to Edward Casaubon, borne of her own misguided principles of diligence and higher purpose, provides only the most prominent illustration of the folly inherent to an overly strict allegiance to ideals in the text. Few characters paint such an unflattering picture of fanaticism or unified vision as Eliot’s Casaubon, whose life work it is to pin the living stream of myth to a single Key, renouncing life for a lonely tributary of outdated scholarship, whilst ‘fulfilling unimpeachably’ his ‘honour according to the code’ (294). Casaubon’s bloodless propriety renders him one of the greatest villains in *Middlemarch*; a punctilious and be-moled casuist much worse than any of the characters marked by inconstancy or outward impropriety. With its pattern of sincere remorse followed by compulsive repetition, Fred Vincy’s shameful gambling habit is far more excusable than callous consistency within the moral economy of the text, where images of mutability, perspectivism and complexity, water and webs, confer a sympathetic light on Fred’s failings. Dorothea’s happier state in her second marriage to Will Ladislaw (a man to whom critics repeatedly affix the epithet ‘mercurial’) confirms the view that decency and felicity entail a vital yet muddled sort of progression through the multiplicities of daily life, far removed from Casaubon’s acts of principled application.

Despite the fêted unity and perfection of the novel’s own form (*Middlemarch* is commonly lauded as the fullest and most perfect realisation of the 19th century realist novel), heterogeneity and spontaneity are the qualities somewhat wistfully legitimised by the text. In the ‘Prelude’, Eliot prefigures Dorothea as a ‘later-born [St] Theresa’, invoking the deeds of obscure but virtuous women whose lives lack the kind of epically unified backdrop from whence earlier, more saintly modes of goodness could shine in relief. With only ‘dim lights and tangled circumstance’ to guide them, Dorothea and her kind do not enjoy the social cohesion and historical unity, what the narrator terms ‘coherent social faith’, needed for unvarying and principled vocation (‘Prelude’). Yet the multifarious nature of modern life, the disorder of the lived as opposed to the recorded life, is not to be regretted in *Middlemarch*, and Dorothea’s eventual contentment (happiness may be too strong a word) is shown to rest on the more stumbling pragmatism of her lived experience. Had Nietzsche read the novel, he would have realised that Eliot was not the petty weighing and measuring moralist he describes, and that his ‘little moralistic female’ spins a web not of narrow certitude, but of secular uncertainty, indeterminacy, and what 20th-century philosophers, doubtless influenced by Nietzschean deicide and perspectivism, would later describe as the problem of radical freedom.¹

¹ Like Charles Dickens, Eliot in fact rejected the popular utilitarianism of the day, denouncing what she perceived as the ‘quantitative view of human anguish’, for an outlook based on moral sympathy and close attention to contextual particulars: ‘moral judgments must remain false and hollow’ she writes in *The Mill on the Floss*, ‘unless they are checked by a perpetual reference to the special circumstances that mark the individual lot’ (*Scenes of Clerical Life*, 270 and *The Mill on the Floss*, 498, quoted by Suzy Anger, 2001: 80-81).
Towards the very end of *Middlemarch*, following the misunderstanding of Ladislaw’s relation to Rosamund, Dorothea rises stoically from her night of sorrow to ask ‘What should I do – how should I act now…?’ (838). The question follows the shocked recognition of her own feelings for Ladislaw, apprehended in the bitter moment of their apparent rejection. But in truth the question of what to do, and how to act, suffuses the whole novel, lending her unremarkable provincial locale and its inhabitants a poignancy beyond their socially and historically illustrative dimensions. There is no sense of fated greatness or teleological triumph in *Middlemarch*. In fact there is little that could be classed as conventional character progression in the novel at all.\(^2\) Instead, the many modes of industry presented – Dorothea’s architectural drawings, Lydgate’s medical reform, Brooke’s parliamentary campaigning and Farebrother’s entomology to name but a few – help contribute to the novel’s rather sad sense of a modern and desublimated world no longer bound by ‘coherent social faith’, and of people engaged in the perennial and somewhat arbitrary quest for what the narrator terms worthy occupation. Eliot’s rejection of a purposive and heroic strain in favour of a newly emergent uncertainty and ennui, reflects the circumspectly individualist tenor of her ethics in a world of growing spiritual and material liberty as well as alienation. In a world lacking unified purpose or credo, the Eliotean protagonist must bear ultimate responsibility for her own moral compass.

Roughly half a century later, existential philosophy would provide an ontological account of that same alienated freedom and of the modern subject’s search for meaningful occupation. The existentialist adage that ‘existence precedes essence’ encapsulates the movement’s claim for praxiological modes of self-knowledge gained through the business of living rather than a priori foundations. By renouncing the subject’s religious or transcendental foundations, the existentialists transformed the lack of an essential substratum or God-given identity, and hence the openness and essential freedom of being, into a primary attribute of human existence. By granting liberty and potential this ontological primacy, they also returned morality or ethics to the rank of first philosophy by insisting on the subject’s fundamental freedom to choose and determine her own identity. In *Middlemarch* Casaubon’s greatest sin against Dorothea is to block this path to self-realisation through free choice and occupation; whilst the gentlewoman’s liberty is material, her oppression derives from inaction and spiritual stultification. With this emphasis upon choice and self-realisation, Eliot gestures – contra utilitarianism – towards a proto-existentialist model of individualism; a model equally opposed to the libertarian individualism of Nietzsche as it is to the contemporary consumerist models of identity and self-realisation he ultimately inspired.

When Jonathan Franzen approaches the question of virtue, personal freedom and the good life in his 2010 novel *Freedom*, he does so with the full weight of Nietzsche’s and the whole Western twentieth century’s intellectual suspicion behind him, towards faith, belief systems and in some quarters towards normative values of any kind. Accordingly, the novel displays a rueful yet broadly ironic attitude towards the condition of liberty it names, informed by the burdens of existential freedom and by the congealed forces of cultural individualism and libertarian economics alike. In Philip Larkin’s 1974 poem ‘High Windows’, the brightness and serenity of the title’s image gestures

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\(^2\) Nina Auerbach makes this point in the essay ‘Dorothea’s Lost Dog’. Contrary to received wisdom, she writes, the spirit of *Middlemarch* resides in its sadness and its lack of a triumphant ending rather than any moral certitude: ‘the integrity of *Middlemarch* is its unrepentant sadness’ she concludes (Auerbach 2006: 105).
towards godless skies and the cultural vapidity of modern progress and opportunity. Franzen’s title operates in a similar way. His name for this condition of loss in the critical essay ‘Perchance to Dream’ is ‘the Ache’; a ‘sense of loneliness and pointlessness’ produced by what he terms ‘the breakdown of communitarianism’ (Franzen 1996: 44). For Freedom’s baby-boomer protagonists, chiefly Patty, her husband Walter and his best friend Richard, the spiritual liberty that comes with authentic being is a distant dream of counter-culturalism, long co-opted by the technologies and neoliberal doxa once promoted as the means to its fruition. Now, the existentialist’s assertions of ontological freedom and committed individualism (as manifested by the moral trenchancy of the youthful Walter) no longer present as radical truths for self-realisation and secure self-identity, but as specious lifestyle options amidst a plurality of pathways promising self-fulfilment. Accordingly, Patty, Walter and Richard exist in a state of cynicism and unhappy condescension towards the spiritual freedom they crave, ironically underscored by the knowledge of their own practical freedom and economic privilege.

In Middlemarch the wealthy Casaubon extends similar privileges to his artistic cousin Ladislaw. Perceiving the younger man’s dilettantism, he asserts that he will nonetheless ‘let him be tried by the test of freedom’ (Eliot 2009: 81). Released from the maternal duties of her earlier life and now lacking in obvious vocation, it is the middle-aged Patty Berglund who is tried by this test most rigorously in Franzen’s novel, with a large portion of the narrative devoted to her own putative assessments in the autobiographical ‘Mistakes Were Made’. The moral test to which Casaubon submits Ladislaw is here internalised as a facet of Patty’s narrative of self-examination and spiritual stock-taking.

There was her cherished freedom to go up to Nameless Lake for weeks at a time whenever she felt like it. There was a more general freedom that she could see was killing her but she was nonetheless unable to let go of. (Franzen 2009: 179)

Like Dorothea in her betrothal to Casaubon, Patty lacks worthy occupation. And like Dorothea, a great part of her problem is the protective paternalism of the husband to whom, in youthful admiration, she freely subordinates her own identity. Acquitted of any financial imperatives to work and insulated from Walter’s daily activities, she suffers a similarly ‘oppressive liberty’, albeit one that she herself has chosen. For unlike Dorothea, who mistakenly envisages a life of intellectual advancement with Casaubon, Patty knowingly selects a life of domesticity followed by progressive indolence. The choice involved in this spiritual stagnation is significant because it places the existential assumptions of authentic choice and of the radically free-will in contention, thereby emboldening the metaphorical quotation marks around the novel’s title. How free Patty, Walter, Richard or any of the characters really are in their world of capitalist democracy is the ultimate question.

But the novel does more than simply dramatize the paradox of their freely chosen unfreedoms; through narrative irony (of which I shall say more later) it also distances itself from the moral universe of its actants, presenting something of a reproach to its central characters’ perceptions of helplessness, and to the culture of sceptical individualism that has influenced them.

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3 Walter’s term for the same loss of common purpose in Freedom is ‘fragmentation’: ‘It’s like the internet, or cable TV – there’s never any center, there’s no communal agreement, there’s just a trillion little bits of distracting noise. […] Intellectually and culturally, we just bounce around like random billiard balls, reacting to the latest stimuli.’ (Franzen 2010: 218).

4 ‘Marriage, which was to bring guidance into worthy and imperative occupation, had not yet freed her from the gentlewoman’s oppressive liberty.’ (Eliot 2009: 288).
Whilst Patty, Walter and Richard all eventually engage in their own searches for meaningful occupation, these activities most commonly take the form of unconvincing distractions. To this end, the novel has more to say about the subject’s flight from existential self-realisation than it does about the path to authentic personhood. This is particularly true of Patty’s forays into extreme exercise, alcoholism and extra-marital sex, activities which, unlike Walter’s conservation projects, her son Joey’s sub-legal trading, or the music and odd-jobbing of Richard, take a uniquely impotent and corporeally self-directed form.

Franzen establishes this propensity for embodied rather than cerebral attempts at self-making early in Patty’s narrative, with her account of the intense physicality and team camaraderie of college-level basketball. Patty’s experience of the game encapsulates the dialectical movements of self-definition and self-transcendence common to most modern, that is to say non-essential or non-foundational, models of personhood. In Hegel and Freud as well as Sartre, the path to subjecthood entails a paradoxical pattern of self-externalisation or objectification through the eyes of the other. Only through the encounter with the other, whose gaze serves to deny subjectivity through objectification, but by the same token to delineate the contours of a distinct and isolable self, does the non-foundational subject encounter self-consciousness. Due to the relational and necessarily shifting nature of these exchanges, selfhood remains an open proposition and an active project. From this broadly existential vantage, Patty’s youthful prowess on the basketball court facilitates this negative or dialectical pattern of self-definition. Rejecting her workaday subject-position for absolute identification with ‘the team’, objectifying herself as an instrument of team glory, Patty acquires her admittedly fragile and, as proves to be the case, unsustainable sense of self. It is this rather delicate and tendentious form of identity that Patty renounces when she marries Walter at the end of her college career and substitutes children and family for identification with her fellow ‘jocks’.

The negativity inherent to Patty’s mode of self-identification extends beyond the relative impersonality of this dialectical exchange however. In Patty, Franzen creates a character in whom self-objectification constitutes a form of morally-inspired self-mortification, and whose moral fanaticism, her consistent sense of inferiority and laxity compared to those around her and in the face of so much freedom, confines her, contra dialectic, to the circular and paradoxical narcissisms of masochism. In both her confession and the extra-diegetic narration, Franzen reserves a metaphoric of physical and moral prostration for Patty in the face of the other, conflating her obsession with goodness and her own moral failings with a tendency for self-inflicted modes of physical stress which serve not to consolidate her sense of self-worth, but to enhance her feelings of despoliation and nullity. Significantly, Franzen chooses to connect these feelings of worthlessness to a familiarly phallocentric trope of female lack and female sexual inversion. In this configuration, Patty’s loss of confidence on the basketball court, her inability to attain her previous sense of validation through sporting achievement, relates directly to the gross violation of her first sexual encounter, rape. Now the sport that once helped to define her sense of identity becomes a theatre of exposure and humiliation and her descriptions of ‘reveling in […] abasement’ and ‘embracing the shame’ (87), are rendered paradigmatic for her subsequent life projects, many of which bear the inflections of Patty’s unhappy mode of eroticism.5

5 The trope of female negativity, of woman as vortex rather than matrix, is consolidated by Patty’s description of herself as an empty vessel; consoled and encouraged by her team-mates on the basketball court, she describes how ‘This new transfusion poured straight into the haemorrhage without circulating even once through Patty’s body’ (Franzen 2010: 87). Likewise, Franzen has Patty describe her sorrow to Richard as ‘a kind of bottomless pit’ (173).
Sartre’s existential theory of sexuality provides a fitting account for this metaphorics, insofar as it situates sexuality as just one expression of the subject’s freedom and will to self-consciousness, and masochism as an embattled response to this struggle for identification. Rejecting Freudian drive-based theories, Sartre contends that sexuality is not so much a given state of human being as it is the expression of our fundamental relationality qua other human beings. Just one, albeit one important manifestation, of a fundamentally conflictual dynamic whereby the individual strives for a sense of self-identity and self-consciousness that can only in fact be achieved indirectly, through the objectifying glances of the other. The aim of desire he writes, is ‘to make the Other’s freedom recognize my freedom’ (Sartre 2003: 393). But the project he claims is always doomed to fail since it requires the success of contradictory objectives: on the one hand the subject must minimise the threat of the other and divest it of consciousness through objectification, but on the other hand the subject must preserve the other’s consciousness so that it can grant her the being she cannot access by herself.⁶ As a response to this failure, masochism entails the willed renunciation of personal freedom (and hence personal responsibility) through self-objectification and the enlargement of the other’s freedom. In Franzen’s characterisation of Patty, we find this mode of faux renunciation linked to her historical context as an educated and privileged woman lacking in more meaningful occupation. Through her distinctly postmodern and self-conscious mode of analysis and her increasingly dissolve and aimless activities, he insinuates a knowingly competitive and for that reason self-hating variety of self-interest; a form of irresponsible individualism specific to his ineffectually privileged Western subjects and to the aimless Patty in particular.

A less charged antecedent to Patty’s moral angst can be traced back to Eliot’s Dorothea, whose yearning for ‘worthy imperative’ articulates a malaise particular to the pre-professional woman of the middle and upper classes. Unencumbered by drudgery but at the same time excluded from large swathes of public life, her liberty comes at the expense of socially active, constraint-borne modes of self-knowledge. Historically, the socially ambiguous situation of such women has been a source of (predictably sexualised) unease amongst the largely male guardians of rectitude. What could such unoccupied women do all day, except revel in the fantasies of their romance novels, or worse still, act upon them? Whilst sex remains a dim and veiled prospect in Middlemarch, this sexualised sense of distrust abounds in Franzen’s construction of Patty, a woman who, in an age of advanced female education and professionalism, has freely forsaken talent, ambition, friends and family for what her neighbours term her ‘regressive housewifely bullshit’ (Franzen 2010: 7). Indeed, it is surely a joke at Patty’s unwitting expense when her creator has her ‘hesitate […] to ascribe too much explanatory significance to sex…’ when it is everywhere in her narrative (140). From the formative and almost uniformly disempowered sexual encounters of her youth (rape, but also her leering grandfather and the betrayals of her first boyfriend) to the uniformly patriarchal and quasi-Freudian dynamics of her other relationships (a professional mother lacking in love; competitive sisters; pathological female friendship; her subordinate position with regards the Patrician ‘dearness’ of Walter and Richards’ friendship and with regards their superior knowledge and savoir faire; her

⁶ Lacking fixed foundations, the subject cannot grasp her own identity in any direct way, since the process of reflection changes the shape of the identity in question: self-knowledge must proceed indirectly through the objectifying perceptions of others. So because other people hold the key to self-knowledge and this knowledge must go by way of a degree of objectification, existential consciousness exists in a state of dynamic conflict, with the other threatening to foreclose our agency and deny our freedom even as it promises to unlock it. In desire, the subject encounters the threat of the other’s freedom and the will to assert her own agency. In order to do so, she must either assume the role of the gaze and stare down the other person’s consciousness and diminish their powers of objectification, or, assume control of the other’s consciousness through her own powers of seduction.
Oedipal preference for her son over her daughter), Franzen attributes sex and sexual difference to all of Patty’s existential woes.

In Sartre, sexuality is an expression of dialectical consciousness and the ineradicable threat of others, but through Franzen’s detailing of sexual power imbalances in Patty’s autobiographical narrative, sexual difference becomes a primary source of otherness, connected through a nexus of sex, self-abasement and virtue signalling, to our distinct distrust of her moral preoccupations. It is testament to Franzen’s ironic presentation that our proximity to Patty’s voice should lead to distrust or even repulsion rather than sympathy. The inauthenticity we elicit behind Patty’s putatively unvarnished confessions is a novelistic judgement upon her moral compass; but since the female experience of sexual difference is – by the author’s choosing – so integral to these confessions, the subject matter itself seems to succumb to ironic sub-textual judgement.

Of course for the existentialists, the freedom to self-create is an index of our more primordial freedom and of our responsibility as moral agents. Lacking an essential or fixed identity, we are nothing but our actions, and the relation between our former and current selves exists in a state of perpetual re-making they claim. One of their greatest adversaries in this respect was psychoanalysis. Contrary to Freud, who viewed past events and the unconscious as constraining psychological forces, Sartre and the existentialists interpreted personal history as a kind of alibi or decoy by which to evade the anguish of our own freedom. The stories we tell ourselves, whether through Freudian, ancestral or sociological lenses, impose reassuring but illusory constraints upon free will, helping us to sidestep the issue of moral agency and our essential culpability. To this extent, existentialism provided a stern and deeply individualistic tonic to the accelerating influences of consumerism and cultural relativism in the mid-20th century, and a clear reproof to those 20th-century philosophies of suspicion, scepticism and mediation which read the lack of a fixed subjective essence or identity as a reproach to individual autonomy and moral agency. Existentialism’s fall from favour was arguably a measure of the latter forces’ absolute triumph, and of their ever-tightening compact under the aegis of democratic freedom.

Whilst Franzen’s construction of Patty and her self-understanding owes a clear debt to psychoanalysis, he makes his own reticence towards such ‘alibis’ of mediation and affiliated theories of social constructivism clear in both his criticism and fiction. The seminar debate between Chip Lambert and Melissa Paquette in The Corrections regarding the more or less cynical role of corporate advertising in public information registers the novel’s measured approach to the question of mass media interpellation and individual agency. Less measured is the novel’s attitude towards the nexus of corporate-clinical interests to have capitalised on a populist therapeutic culture of diminished responsibility and deferred agency. Prefiguring the important role of big pharma in The Corrections, Franzen writes in ‘Perchance to Dream’, of the contemporary novelist’s duty to provide ‘radical critique’ of a ‘therapeutic society’ facilitated by and perpetuated through what he categorises an ‘endless succession of partial cures’: remedies that line the pockets of corporate interests whilst deferring personal agency (Franzen 1996: 44).

Likewise in Freedom, Franzen recalls the Sartrean ethos of radical choice and responsibility with the full force of its moral judgement, whilst using the superficial similarities of an American therapeutic culture shaped by religious and clinical traditions of confession and self-analysis to ironically underscore its arguments. Patty’s narrative of self-accountability, which comes with its own therapeutic framing device – she writes her autobiography ‘at Her Therapist’s Suggestion’ we are told – carries the full weight of Franzen’s censure, anchoring the novel’s viewpoint at an ironic distance from the therapeutic idioms and assumptions of its fictitious author. ‘Mistakes Were Made’
is an ambiguously passive headline for Patty’s statement; the subject of these mistakes is in clear contention. Whilst authentic individualism involves coming to terms with and taking responsibility for one’s own past actions and choices (a gesture common to many psycho-therapeutic methods), Patty’s narrative reads more like a statement of self-justification and self-exoneration, beginning as it does with a lengthy and irony-laden list of wrongs against her person. Childhood and parents, the locus classicus for all modern studies of psyche, are at the top of this list and reported by Patty in the most acerbic tones of faux jocosity. ‘When Jack Kennedy got the Democratic nomination, in 1960, it gave Joyce a noble and stirring excuse to get out of the house that she couldn’t seem to help filling up with babies’; ‘Patty’s father, Ray Emerson, was a lawyer and an amateur humourist whose repertory included fart jokes and mean parodies of his children’s teachers, neighbours, and friends’; ‘Other amusing methods of tormenting Patty were to hide the family dog, Elmo, and pretend that Elmo had been euthanized while Patty was at late basketball practice’ (Franzen 2010: 31); ‘Her grandad, August […] was certainly not very respectful of Patty’s physical boundaries’ (ibid., 33).

Reading Freedom alongside Franzen’s criticism, we elicit the rhetorical indictment subtending Patty’s post-Freudian alibis and the culture of deferred responsibility she embodies. ‘When you hold a book in your hand’ writes Franzen, ‘nothing will happen unless you work to make it happen. When you hold a book, the power and the responsibility are entirely yours’ (Franzen 1996: 40). This sense of direct and immediate agency is what Patty in all her squandered freedom and causal justification lacks. The further unravelling of her character in the wake of this therapeutic mea culpa works to undermine the authenticity and spiritual efficacy of an approach endemically assumed, from Freud to William Griffith Wilson, to set us psychically free. Despite clear indications in the criticism and fiction however, Franzen’s message of responsible individualism is often subsumed to the issue of his narrative form. As in Eliot however, the issues are closely related.

Old Rakes but not the Wicked Kind: Franzen’s Conservative Realism

Notwithstanding his rather jaundiced framing of the Patty narrative, Franzen is himself quite partial to pseudo-confessional writing. From early in his career, he has provided readers with a highly personalised mode of cultural criticism combining general assessments about the state of society with strenuous justifications for his fiction. Indeed his well-attested cultural Protestantism has left no aspect of his own writing unexamined; form, character, tone, intention have all been submitted to the atoning mechanisms of self-scrutiny, with Franzen’s own character and position in society providing the slipstream to broader assessments regarding family, ecology, commerce, technology, and various striations of American culture. ‘Perchance to Dream’ and the similarly well-circulated ‘Mr Difficult’, are long and not without the involutions and circumlocutions of well-crafted portrayals of earnestness; positions are staked, ground is ceded, foundations moderately revised and repositioned. These criss-crossings are conceivably the symptoms of Franzen’s own position, as a white, liberally-educated male who claims to reject literary intellectualism and cultural elitism for the readerly and financial gains of entertainment; the need to justify his art and politics and to repeatedly take a stand being borne of frustration with a conversation that renders these labels mutually paradoxical or inconsistent. But such serial stand-taking is also a means by which to repeat the WASP-ish drama of self-scrutiny, to perform the acts of solemn self-examination appropriate to his well-advertised Mid-Western mores, and which bear a close outward resemblance to the therapeutic narratives he disdains.
Pursuing this strategy in ‘Perchance’, the author presents himself as a kind of heroic limpet cemented by social and ethical commitments to the sinking strategy of realism. ‘Panic grows in the gap between the increasing length of the project and the shrinking time-increments of cultural change...’. Meanwhile ‘[t]he novelist has more and more to say to readers who have less and less time to read (Franzen 1996: 40). Sinking in unmanageable quantities of source material, Franzen describes his slough of Casaubon-shaped despair at the social novelist’s declining relevance in the age of ultra-high-speed information. By this view Eliot and her generation had it easy since they could master a field and explore it fictively without succumbing to quick-fire irrelevancy. Given the age of Franzen’s essay and its antecedent relation to his major novels, critics such as Stephen Burn have suggested we get over ‘Perchance to Dream’ and stop treating it as a canonical statement on his craft. Not least because according to Burn ‘Franzen’s fiction works on much more complex ground than the rhetorical flourishes of his nonfiction suggests’ (Burn 2008: 50-51). Of course Burn is right to admonish critics who let the author’s annotations speak louder than their works, but the relatively overlooked question of Franzen’s moralism and his code of mid-Western individualism is in fact wholly salient to the periodizing context that dominates his critical reception.

George Eliot’s conviction that individuals must take responsibility for their actions and choices as individuals issued from her philosophical reading and, as a dissenting woman writer, from her own hard-won freedoms. That capacities for moral sympathy and imaginative identification were integral to this vision of responsibility meant that the practice of novel writing was itself a means to ethical instruction bordering on vocation; to echo the words of Bert G. Hornback, ‘art which has its source in the idea of moral perfection’ was for Eliot ‘also a duty’ (Hornback 1972: 381). Similarly, Franzen’s commitment to what he terms the ‘serious’ ‘social novel’ bears a number of tacit assumptions regarding the morally edifying properties of worthy literature and of realist narrative in particular. The lead proponent of this relatively unfashionable stance in recent years has been the philosopher Martha Nussbaum, who contends, à la Aristotle and Arnold, that readerly immersion within believable characters and their predicaments enables one to rehearse moral choices and consequences and to behave better in one’s own world as a result. Her blueprint for this model of literary education is Henry James, whose assiduously nuanced and immersive psychological portrayals offer his readers a vicarious form of moral knowledge. In ‘Perchance to Dream’ Franzen allies his own mimetic responsibilities as a serious social novelist with the quaintly Jamesian formulation of Flannery O’Connor, for whom the ‘business of fiction’ was, as Franzen quotes her, ‘to embody mystery [“how human beings avoid or confront the meaning of existence”] through manners [“the nuts and bolts of how human beings behave”]’ (Franzen 1996: 42). In the postmodern milieu of Franzen’s novels, this interplay between manner and mystery often takes the form of a moral, geographical and generational tension between provincial mid-Western mores of self-reliance and application and ‘the single vertical drama’ (ibid.: 43) of liberal cosmopolitanism; a tension neatly encapsulated by the competing models of existential and neoliberal individualism outlined in the previous section.

Yet for the main part, critics have tended to situate Franzen’s realism in an historical and periodizing rather than ethical context, relating his ambitions to wider discussions surrounding influence and literary form in the new millennium. The formal preoccupations of postmodernism, more specifically a particular brand of white, male, American postmodernism, have been a mainstay of Franzen criticism to date, with authors such as William Gaddis, Thomas Pynchon, Don DeLillo and Philip Roth providing the bulwark to comparative and evaluative studies of his work. In Jonathan Franzen at the End of Postmodernism for example, Burn contests naïvely realist interpretations of Franzen’s fiction with a discussion of his early writings and an extended analysis of latent...
postmodernist devices in *The Corrections*.\(^7\) Exhibiting a certain distrust towards Franzen’s arguments in ‘Perchance to Dream’, Burn states that the question of his form, and of his place in literary history by extension, should be answered primarily with reference to his fiction. A tendency for neat binary polemics – postmodernism or realism; the social novel or innovative stylistics; intellectualism or fun – leads to what Burn terms the merely ‘simulated epiphany’ of the essay’s conclusion, and a solution belying the true, postmodernist, complexity of *The Corrections*’ architectonics (Burn 2008: 50-51).

An imperative to foreground these techniques arose in part as a response to Adam Kelly’s influential thesis concerning the dialectic of sincerity after postmodernity. Kelly identifies a new turn in the dialectic of sincerity outlined by Lionel Trilling, whereby the late or post-postmodern author seeks to communicate or to represent the subject’s desire for authentic expression, despite the all-pervasive cynicism and irony pervading cultural discourse in the post-theoretical culture of late postmodernism. Kelly perceives a technical solution to this dilemma in the speech acts of Alcoholics Anonymous as represented in the 1996 novel *Infinite Jest* by David Foster Wallace, where ‘all the speakers’ stories of decline and fall and surrender are basically alike, and like your own’ (Wallace 1997: 345, quoted in Kelly 2014: 14 of 26 paras). The force of these utterances issues not from their individual authenticity or spontaneity but contrarily, from their institutional universality, and the opportunities they create for group identification in a world of accelerated individualism. Here sincerity, once the preserve of liberal individualism and freedom, transmutes into a ritualised performance designed to forestall the negative excesses of that freedom. The irony involved in this representative gesture marks a new turning point in Trilling’s dialectic and one important solution to the technical dilemmas of post-postmodernist representation; in essence, how to signify meaningfully in the wake of meaning’s rhetorical evisceration, following the literary linguistic games of postmodernism. *Arguably*, Franzen’s form compares unfavourably from this vantage, his professed adherence to a relatively fixed ideal of 19th-century realism marking him as a kind of latter-day Lukács, digging his heels-in against the experimentation of Wallace and earlier avant-gardists like Brecht.\(^8\)

Highlighting Franzen’s creative dialogue with postmodernism, Burn is right to caution a degree of scepticism towards his critical self-justifications. It seems curious for instance, that in ‘Perchance to Dream’, an essay so clearly seeking to delineate an agenda with regards realism and the historical moment, that he should omit to reference literary form in its dialectical relation to historical reality. The options he presents, realism or postmodernism, intellectual obscurantism or the pleasurably immediate text, whilst loosely situated in their socio-temporal settings and symptomatically described – for example, ‘The big, obvious reason that the social novel has become so scarce is that modern technologies do a better job of social instruction’ (8); ‘American publishing is now a subsidiary of Hollywood’ (8); or, somewhat portentously, ‘I saw leaf-blowers replacing rakes’ (6) – stop short of the kind of dialectical analyses betokening an appreciation of realism’s depth historicity. By depth historicity I mean the reciprocal relation between forms and their historical moment; how movements in history alter the perceptual effects of forms like literary realism and, vice versa, how forms or genres shape and alter the perceptual field of the historical

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\(^7\) The premise of such naivety is of course a straw man – what author ever found the task of literary representation uncomplicated or unproblematic? – but in this context it refers specifically to realisms of the 19th century, before literary modernisms and postmodernisms sought to illustrate problems of language and reference formally and performatively.

\(^8\) The most salient exchanges in the realism - modernism debate, including those of Brecht and Lukács, are collated in Adorno et al. 2007, *Aesthetics and Politics* (London: Verso).
moment. Catalogued and admonished, the automated reality of leaf-blowers is never pursued in terms of its psycho-perceptual repercussions. Although Franzen is clearly familiar with Marxian and social-theoretical accounts of meaning (he has recounted his liberal arts education severally, exposing it to sympathetic parody through the figure of Chip Lambert in *The Corrections*), his literary analyses favour dichotomies over dialectics. The age of the novel’s greatest cultural authority, about which Franzen clearly feels wistful in ‘Perchance’, when ‘Dickens, Darwin and Disraeli all read one another’s work’ (41), may have been a symptom of history owing to a lack of competing modes of entertainment (51), but the strengths of that precise form we infer from his criticism were not. Corroborating Lukács’ prejudice against the perceived solipsism and difficulty of anti-realist and avant-garde fiction, essays like ‘Perchance to Dream’ and ‘Mr Difficult’ mount concerted background defences of the nineteenth-century panoramic novel as a statically superior model for socio-ethical exploration.9

Yet despite the limitations of Franzen’s criticism and its perceived inconsistency with regards his own fiction, there is something rather telling about the personal drama and ‘simulated epiphany’ of his critical polemics. They corroborate the picture of a mind wrestling with questions about which it seems to care deeply, for whom the apparent choice between aesthetic innovation and social conscience really does matter, and for whom the question of literature’s role in contemporary society is ultimately a question of human destiny and indeed morality. The individual who perceives the switch from manual to mechanised means of domestic leaf collection as a sign of cultural degradation cares about societal values a great deal, and it renders him or her well-suited to the construction of genteel fictive satire (leaf-blowers are amongst the many metonymies of poor taste and cultural morbidity in *The Corrections*’ fictional town of St Jude).10 In a learned essay about literature and the long slide of culture however, it also renders that person the potential target for a certain amount of satire. The observation betokens an order of care and domesticity clearly at odds with the affective backdrop of postmodernism; a bandwidth encompassing nonchalance, nihilism, ebullience and weary indignation, but rarely the kind of moralistic, conclusions that Franzen deduces from concrete particulars.11

Indeed, Franzen’s moral care is more entrenched I would argue. Animated by the small ‘c’ of conservatism, it is as distinct from a rhetorical dialectic of sincerity, with its ironically mediated and ritualised performance, as it is from postmodernist registers of scepticism and indignation. In both of these models, irony is employed to mark the limits of liberal humanism and its model of subjective

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9 In ‘Mr Difficult’, Franzen combines his characteristically complicated admiration for William Gaddis with a refutation of the formal and intellectual demands Gaddis places upon his readership. The essay elides difficulty with formal experimentation, and the formal satisfactions of so-called ‘contract fiction’ (story-telling which conforms to readerly expectations and realist mimetic conventions) with timelessness. ‘Both the moderns and the postmoderns resorted to a kind of literature of emergency […] One frequent problem with the literature of emergency is that is doesn’t age well.’ The inference here of course is that classically ‘transparent’ fictions do. He proceeds to a stance of what we might call literary fundamentalism, aligning ‘the most fundamental human art’ of fiction, with its ‘conservative and conventional’ and ‘democratic’ (accessible or easy) character.

10 ‘You could feel it: something terrible was going to happen. The sun low in the sky, a minor light, a cooling star.’ And then with the realist’s familiar gesture of telescoping, ‘No children in the yards here. Shadows lengthened on yellowing zoysia. Red oaks and pin oaks and swamp white oak rained acorns on houses with no mortgage. Storm windows shuddered in the empty bedrooms, And the drown and hiccups of a clothes dryer, the nasal contention of a leaf blower…’ (Franzen 2001: 1).

11 See above for example. The realist convention of cataloguing, the ‘yard-measuring and parcel tying’ as XX calls it, of red oak, pin oak and swamp white oak, is part of a much greater social and moral judgement on Franzen’s part, not only of the wealthy unpopulated ‘gerontocratic suburbs’ but as a reflection of America and the attenuated passing of an old political and technological order.
agency; where postmodernist narratives ironically undercut the pretensions of spontaneous individualism, exposing the subject’s linguistically and institutionally mediated character and the illusions of rationality, sincerity involves the irony of submitting willfully to those very structures of mediation and illusion in the hope of gaining a minimal foothold in subjective autonomy, if not transcendence. In Kelly’s example from *Infinite Jest*, Wallace’s alcoholics participate in the self-supporting fellowship of ritualized confession and structured recovery. For the subject dispossessed by her own excessive freedoms, submission to this collective principle promises release from the self and the chance of a higher mode of liberty through impersonality. The irony identified by Kelly and Wallace issues from the participant’s commitment to what she herself recognises as a purely formal ritual, devoid of inherent meaning or hidden profundity; commitment to an act of mediation and self-negation no less. In this context the anonymity of AA is given a new denotation.

But Franzen’s conservative brand of realism travels in the opposite direction. His novels demonstrate an encyclopaedic knowledge of social and empirical systems – seismography, pharmaceuticals, civil engineering, contemporary hospitality, statecraft, charitable organisations to name but a few – and true to his critical aspirations, they present a number of classically left-leaning arguments against an increasingly networked and corporatized neoliberalist culture. So it is that in *The Corrections* we witness the gradual usurpation of one grand network or *modus vivendi* by another, as the orderly analogue world of Alfred Lambert (the railroad network, the periodic table upon which his metallurgical hobby depends, his unwavering code of moral conduct) is besieged by energies of unseemly complexity, excess and cultural relativism, principles that carry the cast of a generalised foul-play in Alfred’s progressively senescent eyes. But whilst the criticism and fiction corroborate Franzen’s commitment to this kind of cultural interrogation, it is in fact character and character dynamics, Alfred’s retreat from this gauche new world, Enid’s affections and disaffections for her children, Patty’s masochistic despair, that predominate in Franzen’s emplotments and his readers’ affections.

Having expressed hostility towards the academy and the perceived facility of some of its liberal doxa in interviews, the model for Franzen’s characterisation is not the liberal orthodoxy of constructivism (the subject forged and fettered through ideology), but a model of autonomy and responsible individualism reminiscent of Eliot and her precursory variant on existentialism. Following in the footsteps of De Beauvoir and Sartre, it is the individual’s choices and actions, rather than societal forces, which carry the greatest narratological burden in Franzen’s fiction, in terms both of characterisation and récit. Against the postmodern subject of total mediation, whose lack of agency is a source of irony for postmodernists, and against the ironically acquiescent subject of New Sincerity, Franzen validates his principle of self-reliance whilst ironizing what he presents as the alibis of the neoliberal subject. The consequence of this in *Freedom* is the narrative’s fundamentally arch stance towards its characters and their self-justifications. Although Franzen and Eliot both use irony to imbue and unpick character and motivation, the sympathetic effects of this irony are quite different. In the next section I suggest that this has to do with their different epistemic contexts, and with the dialectical nature of realism more generally.
‘[A] Peculiar kind of inner prestidigitation, in which I manage to talk myself into being something’

According to Fredric Jameson, Edward Casaubon’s callous consistency in *Middlemarch* is illustrative of an important development in characterisation and realist technique, an advance he identifies with the representation of characters’ ‘inner prestidigitations’ and with the existential condition of *mauvaise foi* or bad faith. As the architects of this philosophical concept, de Beauvoir and Sartre define it as a state of subjective inauthenticity in the face of personal freedom. Evading responsibility for her own potential, the subject of *mauvaise foi* convinces herself of her own diminished agency and the necessity of her past actions, thereby limiting her freedom to the confines of a particular rôle. The character of Murielle in De Beauvoir’s ‘The Monologue’ (De Beauvoir 1969) is an extreme dramatization of this inauthentic state. Prostrated by grief at the loss of her daughter and psychically trapped by the rage she feels towards all who surround her, Murielle’s stream of consciousness illustrates the self-division at work in bad faith, as she internalises the aspersions of other people in order to rehearse her narrative of trenchant self-justification. Casaubon’s refusal to acknowledge the failure of his scholarly endeavours or to acknowledge the intimidating reality that he is entirely free to change course, is an example of just this kind of self-deception and illness, and the source of much misery for those who surround him. Importantly, as a kind of inner prestidigitation and a talking oneself into being, the phenomenological content of *mauvaise foi* is identical to its narrative form: Jameson describes it in terms of ‘an endless, impossible argument […] in the mind of the character seeking self-justification’ (Jameson 2013: 132). In technical terms, this kind of internal monologue also solves a representational problem for Eliot concerning the exploration of moral conduct in her novels. *Avant la lettre*, Jameson claims, *mauvaise foi* was Eliot’s ‘triumphant solution’ to the twin challenges of a more nuanced and modern manner of characterisation, and to her own moralistic tendencies:

To neutralize the effects of her own pedagogical and moralizing temperament, to steer a course between the two formal alternatives of melodrama and the most saccharine Utopian fantasies – this is Eliot’s fundamental technical dilemma. (ibid. 133)

How to depict immoral behaviours and dissect good and ill, as was her want, when everything in one’s make-up (philosophy, the rejection of Evangelism, literary brilliance) contests the notion of pure maleficence and the reductive, quasi-allegorical depictions it incurs? The existentialists in the 20th century construed evil as a thought of the excluded other rather than an in-dwelling property. In an analogous form, Eliot’s representational solution to her own moralizing temperament was to forsake the purely external verdicts of the omniscient narrator, whose judgements are always a risk to hermeneutic subtlety, for the involutions of inner consciousness and a mode akin (although for Jameson not identical) to *style indirect libre*. The breadth of vision and moral sympathy for which Henry James applauds Eliot is in no small way made possible by this development in the dramatization of the unhappy soul. So it is that when we encounter the pinched horizons of Casaubon and the febrile insecurities of his submerged conscience, we feel pity towards his entrapment more than fear.

For Jameson, this progression away from caricatured evil is part of a larger ‘waning of protagonicity’ and named emotion in the mid-to-late 19th-century novel. *Mauvaise foi* is Eliot’s contribution towards a more psychologistic and affect-laden style of narrative, which works by

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12 Fredric Jameson, The Antinomies of Realism, 2013: 131: ‘So mauvaise foi in this respect will involve a peculiar kind of inner prestidigitation, in which I manage to talk myself into being something.’
13 Jameson, ibid: Chapter V.
bridging the gulf between social judgement and inner feeling, the self and the marginalised and evil other, and the distance between narrator and narrated. In the cloistered world of *Middlemarch* in particular, where the action is largely a matter of refracted feeling and refracted judgements, this subjectivistic principle reaches its fullest realisation, lending the large caste of *Middlemarch* (with the exception perhaps its principle players) a bearing closer to intersubjective feeling than sharply contoured character; in this way the novel, with its episodic structure and multiple psychological perspectives, becomes the story of a way of life, of the interpenetrating currents of a given horizon of living and thinking.

As a writer likewise attuned to his own moralising tendencies, Franzen has written of his need to sidestep the seductions of moralism when writing (see Franzen 1996: 52). His characterisation of Patty’s *mauvaise foi* in the autobiographical section of *Freedom* looks like an effort to do just this, as it cedes judgement to the character and her feelings alone. Yet as we have seen, the effect of her narrative, and of Franzen’s ironic effect, is really quite different; in part at least because the dialectic of realism identified by Jameson has moved on, and because the divided psyche prefigured by Eliot is now freighted with overfamiliarity, so much so that Patty’s self-representation reads like a much more knowing and cloying mode of self-justification; and Franzen’s construction much less sympathetic for that reason.

Moreover, whilst Franzen shares Eliot’s concern to avoid moral didacticism, his technical dilemma with the postmodern world he depicts is somewhat different. Through *mauvaise foi*, Eliot sidestepped the moralism of melodrama and contributed to a progressively psychological and subjectivistic mode of realist characterisation informed by contemporaneous theories of mind. At the narrative and thematic levels, Casaubon’s *mauvaise foi* turns upon the disjunction of his inner cogitations and public declarations to create the genteel irony of the extra-diegetic narration and its judgements. Importantly however, whilst Eliot promulgates a distinctly modern vision of complexity, pragmatism and particularity in her novels, her moral and epistemic outlook stops a long way short of the kind of Nietzschean or postmodern relativism that both impels and besets Franzen’s writing context. Indeed, Eliot’s vision of responsible individualism is upheld by her trust in moral facts, interpersonally intuited, yet impartially resolute and objective all the same. In *The Mill on the Floss* Eliot describes this moral bearing in terms of a ‘sense of other’s claims’ (Eliot 2003: 466). The sympathetic largesse, and the stable irony of Eliotean *mauvaise foi* hinges upon the serene objectivity of her narrators’ epistemic position.

Although Franzen shares Eliot’s commitment to thought, feeling and responsible agency, his technical challenge is complicated by the need to represent postmodern characters whose affects and experiences are already mediated, and self-consciously so, by the psychological and therapeutic models conventionally deployed in the creation of modern character and subjective states. Granted Franzen’s critical stance towards this culture of mediation, his technical dilemma is this: how to critique postmodernist society through character, when the character in question is defined historically by her pre-emptive knowledge of your representational strategies and the cultural discourses that inform them? How to leverage some vestige of authenticity and individuality from the individual convinced of individualism’s illusory qualities (whether cynically or ‘sincerely’), and who reads the subject’s lack of an essential identity (and the shifting sands of her own ‘inner prestidigitation’) as a sign, not of spontaneity or radical freedom, but of the subject’s mediation (or overdetermination) and lack of freedom? Now *mauvaise foi* entails the secondary irony of the subject’s recognition of her own self-deceptions. More than this however, with the technique’s re-emergence in *Freedom*, we witness *mauvaise foi*’s transformation from an individual psychological state into a pervasive social principle borne of the postmodern epistemic condition. *Freedom’s*
privileged protagonists all flee the recognition of their liberty and seek strategies for distracting occupation, but their feckless mode of privilege is only symptomatic of a wider predicament concerning knowledge.

To this extent Franzen’s attention to various social ‘systems’ in his novels serves to illustrate the connection between *mauvaise foi* conceived as a social and epistemic malaise. The point of connection is what we might call for want of a better term, the subject’s ‘stranded’ knowledge; a level of individual technocratic specialization that is almost directly proportionate to our increasing dependency upon vast and complex systems (economic, bureaucratic, cybernetic, chemical or indeed ecological) that we neither fully understand nor trust. When Walter Berglund compromises his ecological scruples towards the end of *Freedom*, his drive to secure the fate of one avian species comes at the cost of untold indirect damage to the wider biosphere. His justifications read like a clear case of moral relativism. But the bad faith that erodes his conscience (his assertion that things must necessarily be this way, but only for the time being) is also symptomatic of his broader ignorance, and of our general co-implication in causal webs of association. In this atmosphere, cynicism towards totalising claims to knowledge, towards moral objectivity or indeed narrative omniscience, is a cultural expression of this contingently felt freedom. To this end, Franzen’s fatalism in ‘Perchance to Dream’ speaks far louder than the ‘simulated epiphany’ of social conscience summoned towards the essay’s close. The author committed to the relaying of postmodern society in all its cynicism and free-floating irony cannot presume to be anything other than morally implicated in the spiritual bind afflicting his or her subjects; such narrative transcendence would undermine the material.

The narrative effect of this is a foreclosure of the intra- and extra-diegetic perspectives in *Freedom*, and a kind of restless narrative imminence that is nonetheless full of judgement. As a technical solution to moralism and the incongruity of postmodern narrative omniscience, the depiction of *mauvaise foi* through characters such as Patty enables Franzen to explore postmodern individualism and the deferred responsibility of therapeutic culture without intrusive narrative direction. But the result, paradoxically, is a harsh ventriloquism compounded by the proximity of Patty’s and the extradiegetic narrator’s voices. This formal effect feels entirely appropriate to the depiction of its wary informed and cynically individualist topos. But the moral indictment implicit to Patty’s account reads all the more bitterly and problematically in light of the thematic terrain Franzen chooses for her; a terrain that makes the whole postmodern culture of incredulity towards moral truth and personal agency pivot on sexual disturbance and caricatures of female inauthenticity.

The purpose of this essay has been to demonstrate how the different narrative contexts of Eliot and Franzen make for the markedly different effects of *mauvaise foi* in their novels. Thinking about Franzen’s moral vision and his mode of conservative realism has also helped to illuminate a central point of difference between this author and the coterie of either postmodernist, or post-postmodernist authors, with whom he is regularly compared. As I suggest, the quality of irony inherent to Franzen’s use of *mauvaise foi* distinguishes him from the irony and scepticism of postmodernist anti-characterisation and from the irony of ‘sincerity’ identified by Kelly in authors like Wallace. Yet hinging as it does upon the ventriloquism and othering of female experience, it is important to note the ways by which *mauvaise foi* from Eliot to Franzen devolves, from a strategy of sympathetic narrative forbearance into a mechanism for Nietzschean parody.

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