"A smile and a shoeshine" From F. Scott Fitzgerald To Jonathan Franzen, By Way of Arthur Miller: The American Dream in "The Great Gatsby, Death of a Salesman, and The Corrections"

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"A smile and a shoeshine" From F. Scott Fitzgerald To Jonathan Franzen, By Way of Arthur Miller: The American Dream in *The Great Gatsby, Death of a Salesman, and The Corrections*

Ty Hawkins

In *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920-1940*, Roland Marchand argues that the twentieth-century shift in American industry from localized shops to corporate conglomerations equated to a process of labor and consumer alienation along the lines that Marx anticipated in the nineteenth century. Marchand suggests further that this alienation, a result of the nationwide depersonalization of business through the systematization of production and sales, ironically became a productive force in and of itself. As early twentieth-century technological advancements distanced American producers from their workers and consumers, citizens developed a need for "not a true mirror but a Zerrspiegel, a distorting mirror that would enhance certain images" (xvii). In other words, citizens manifested a demand for rhetoric that would assure them that the modern era had not fully mechanized the human—that the country's systems-thought-borne industrial development had not wholly materialized the spiritual, in an age Kurt Vonnegut has characterized as one in which "almost all of American industry [was] integrated into one stupendous Rube Goldberg machine" (5).[1] It was advertisers who filled this need, Marchand informs us,

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creating rhetorical commonplaces that functioned "as efficient mass communications that rationalized and lubricated an impersonal market of vast scale" (9). Advertisers "gradually observed and responded to a popular demand that modern products be introduced to [their consumers] in ways that gave the appearance and feel of a personal relationship" (xxi). To frame this a bit differently, we might say that advertisers did nothing less than sell consumers the American Dream narrative—that hard work begets increased production and the potential for consumption-fueled upward mobility, which in turn betters one's standard of living. According to the Dream, all of this occurs in an environment that recognizes and rewards the contributions of each constituent, without encroaching on his or her individual freedoms.

Advertising's move to a consumer-friendly approach during the twentieth century's first few decades proved highly effective because it coerced workers and consumers into participating in their own subjugation. That is, this personalizing effort allowed advertisers to align themselves and their "potential consumer on the *same side* in opposition to a task or problem confronting the consumer" (Marchand 14, author's emphasis). The effort elicited consumers' latent ideological and overt practical acceptance of the nation's systematic metamorphosis into a state governed by a cycle of production and consumption. Regrettably, this cycle, which is ours today, creates in those who adhere to it a consciousness characterized by binary oscillations—new technology both giving rise to and serving as the remedy for citizens' fears of cultural instability. As Cecelia Tichi writes in *Shifting Gears: Technology, Literature, Culture in Modernist America*, "machines, their users, and their designers drew fire for abetting the destabilization of culture and society. Ironically, it was precisely this anxiety about a global state of instability that fostered an intense appreciation for the power of technology" (42).[2]

Fortunately, it also is precisely this anxiety that has fostered three of America's most cogent artistic attempts to break this cycle and complicate our understanding of the Dream narrative, through the exposure of its collusion with American commerce and advertising. F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925), Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1949), and Jonathan Franzen's most-recent novel, *The Corrections* (2001), all deal with the manner in which the advertised Dream debases the American spirit by entrenching the hegemony of

materialism and thereby limiting the potential establishment of communal spaces that escape commercialization. Inasmuch, these texts may be read together as humanistic counterarguments to the excesses of a corporatized economy and the cultural disjunction such an economy causes. The three works' protagonists—James Gatz/Jay Gatsby, Willy Loman, and Alfred Lambert, respectively—all are characters who buy and sell "the illustrations in American advertising [that] portrayed the ideals and aspirations of the [modern business] system more accurately than its reality" (Marchand xviii). Because of this, all three are left not whole, but rather, in *Gatsby* narrator Nick Carraway's words, "grotesque, circumstantial, eager and untrue" (Fitzgerald 171). Of the three writers, Fitzgerald perhaps most lucidly and most beautifully portrays this fragmentation, while Miller works with Fitzgerald's paradigm and proposes a solution to it. That is, Miller reconfigures the Dream as one in which modern man returns to hands-on work, a return that may allow him to reconnect with his environs and assert his status as a fully realized being. It is Franzen, then, who continues the commitment to social criticism of these two antecedents, and in so doing highlights the limits of Miller's hypothesis. Franzen proposes a more viable, contemporary solution to the fragmentation of the American citizen by showing us that because any labor can be systematized, hands-on work no longer represents a tenable avenue to wholeness. Instead, wholeness only may be achieved through the combination of a macrocosmic awareness of one's entrapment within a commercial culture and a microcosmic commitment to the creation of community in the ever-shrinking spaces this culture leaves relatively unfettered.

To begin with *Gatsby*'s distillation of fragmentation, I would argue that from the inception of the novel to its conclusion Fitzgerald never once loses his hold on the bipolar consciousness of industrialized America. There is, of course, a good reason for this. *Gatsby* opens with a direct challenge to cultural fragmentation, a challenge Nick Carraway states that he heard from his father in "younger and more vulnerable years" and has "been turning over in my mind ever since" (5). This challenge fundamentally is an assertion on the part of Nick's father of the Golden Rule—it perhaps the most historically pervasive critique of disinterested materialism available in Western culture. As Nick recalls it, the elder Carraway said, " 'Whenever you feel like

criticizing anyone . . . just remember that all the people in this world haven't had the advantages that you've had'" (5). Armed with and feeling a duty to answer to this ideal, Nick immediately establishes a hold on the text, a hold that involves Nick in an attempt to define what has kept him from providing such an answer by way of a portrayal of his involvement in the world of James Gatz/Jay Gatsby. What we learn immediately, then, is that Nick is a character of "reserve," a quality that is in part deeply romantic (5). As Nick states, "Reserving judgments is a matter of infinite hope" (6). Yet at the same time this quality also is deeply systemic; it arises out of Nick's recognition of inequitably distributed "sense[s] of the fundamental decencies," a recognition Nick shared with his father (6). From *Gatsby*'s first lines, therefore, we are well aware that Nick's bifurcated mind and voice will carry us through the novel—so much so, in fact, as to effect a kind of Joycean claritas, whereby Fitzgerald recedes into the background, "refined out of existence," as Nick's voice gains ascendancy (Joyce 233).[3] And by *Gatsby*'s conclusion, we discover that Nick's mind and voice are our mind and voice.

Nick has recently returned home from World War I service in Europe. He tells us that he craves order, this desire having only intensified after his engagements with East and West Egg during the autumn that precedes the novel's present action. Nick states that when he "came back from the East . . . I felt that I wanted the world to be in uniform and at a sort of moral attention forever; I wanted no more riotous excursions with privileged glimpses into the human heart" (6). Only "Gatsby who represented everything for which [he has] an unaffected scorn" proves "exempt from [Nick's] reaction" (6)—the reason being that, as Nick states, "Almost any exhibition of complete self-sufficiency draws a stunned tribute from me" (13). As Nick recognizes, Gatsby is a man who creates order in disorder. To be sure, Gatsby does carry about him the cloak of the romantic—the cloak, more or less, of an aesthete. Nick states that Gatsby displays "an extraordinary gift for hope, a romantic readiness such as I have never found in any other person and which it is not likely I shall ever find again" (6). Yet this hope is a constructed one; it is Gatsby's own self-machinization. Gatsby does indeed possess "some heightened sensitivity to the promises of life," as Nick conjectures (6). This sensitivity is not natural, however; it is the sensitivity of a machine, the

sensibility that works through binary oppositions, honing its efficiency and eliminating waste in pursuit of a singular goal—in pursuit, we will learn, of Daisy. Gatsby truly is "related to one of those intricate machines that register earthquakes ten thousand miles away" (6). He is the "Platonic conception" of James Gatz, a conception made in "the service of a vast, vulgar and meretricious beauty" (104)—this beauty being the Dream itself. The universe of Jay Gatsby is one "of ineffable gaudiness . . . a promise that the rock of the world was founded securely on a fairy's wing" (105). Gatsby's universe is founded securely, that is, on the Dream's fundamental tenant, that hard work will grant a person opulence—will grant James Gatz Daisy, whose voice is "'full of money'" (127), provided he works hard enough at becoming Jay Gatsby.[4] It is Gatsby's commitment to the Dream, and his own, then, that draw Nick toward and push Nick away from Gatsby. As Nick states, "I was within and without, simultaneously enchanted and repelled by the inexhaustible variety of life" (40). In Tichi's terms, Nick is at once anxious about and appreciative of the Dream. He is the Dream's critic and adherent, just as we are.

It is important to note here that the attraction of Gatsby, and Nick, to Daisy cannot be reduced to greed, just as Nick's attraction to Jordan Baker escapes such reduction. For Gatsby and Nick, Daisy does not simply represent money. Daisy, as Nick says, possesses the capacity to, "looking up into my face, [promise] that there was no one in the world she so much wanted to see" (13). Daisy murmurs, some say, "to make people lean toward her," and her voice is a "low, thrilling . . . arrangement of notes that will never be played again" (13). Daisy's voice assures listeners that "she had done gay, exciting things just a while since and that there were gay, exciting things hovering in the next hour" (14). Daisy and Jordan Baker—the latter woman's name a combination of two early twentieth-century automobile makes—have the ability to produce white noise: "Sometimes she and Miss Baker talked at once, unobtrusively and with a bantering inconsequence that was never quite chatter, that was as cool as their white dresses and their impersonal eyes in the absence of all desire" (16-17). To be frank, Daisy is the side-by-side advertisement Marchand describes. When presented with a product (such as Jordan Baker) Daisy can align herself with her consumer (in this case, Nick) and close the deal. Inasmuch, Nick is at once repulsed by Daisy and drawn to her promise of possibility. On

Nick's first visit to the Buchanans' West Egg home, Daisy's advertisement for the plight of young girls—her argument that a girl is best served by being "'a beautiful little fool'" (21)—leaves Nick feeling "as though the whole evening had been a trick of some sort to exact a contributory emotion from me" (22). Put differently, Daisy's advertisement is designed to extract Nick's allowance that Daisy has "asserted her membership in a rather distinguished secret society to which she and [her husband] Tom belonged" (22). Nick understands as much. In fact, Nick seems to recognize the reasons for Daisy's effort—recognize that only if the presence of a "secret society" is naturalized can the concurrent existence of the "valley of ashes" be justified, a "desolate area of land" where "ashes take the form of houses and chimneys and rising smoke and finally, with a transcendent effort, of men who move dimly and already crumbling through the powdery air" (27). Nick understands that the advertisement, Daisy, creates "an impenetrable cloud which screens their obscure operations from your sight" (27). Yet Nick is sufficiently entrenched in a culture of advertisements—Daisy is his cousin, let us not forget—that he cannot fully sever his ties to it. And Gatsby, for his part, decides to become an advertisement.[5]

Our first introduction to Gatsby arrives early in the novel, on the heels of Nick's return to East Egg after his first visit with the Buchanans in West Egg. From humble quarters next door, Nick watches Gatsby emerge from his palatial estate late in the evening. Nick sees Gatsby "regarding the silver pepper of the stars . . . come out to determine what share was his of our local heavens" (25). Nick does not call out to Gatsby, for the latter "gave a sudden intimation that he was content to be alone" (25). Alone with the heavens, then, a "trembling" Gatsby extends his arms toward "a single green light, minute and far away" (26). Framed by his mansion, it the fruit of his hard work, Gatsby pays puja to the "minute," ephemeral Dream, the "light." He asks this moneyed, "green" intangible to grant him "his share," to grant him Daisy, a metonymic representation of the Dream here on Earth. James Gatz has built himself into the Dream's advertisement—as Jay Gatsby, mastering a smile that "understood you just so far as you wanted to be understood, believed in you as you would like to believe in yourself and assured you that it had precisely the impression of you that, at your best, you hoped to convey" (52-53). And now Gatsby asks

for his entitlement, entrance into the "secret society." Gatsby's desire is not simple greed, then; he wishes only for what the Dream has promised, that for which he has worked in spectacular fashion. For this reason, Nick is quite right to conclude that Gatsby's demise does not result from some internal flaw. Gatsby is not our traditional tragic hero. Instead, as Nick states, "Gatsby turned out all right at the end; it is what preyed on Gatsby, what foul dust floated in the wake of his dreams that temporarily closed out my interest in the abortive sorrows and short-winded elations of men" (6-7).

What preyed on Gatsby is, of course, this singular desire for entrance into the secret society, it "safe and proud above the hot struggles of the poor" (157). Gatsby has embraced modernity's vision of success, purchasing status symbols old and new—butlers and juicers, ancient cordials, and guests with "hair shorn in strange new ways" (44). As Nick states, Gatsby is "so peculiarly American," possessed of "that resourcefulness of movement . . . that comes . . . with the absence of lifting work or rigid sitting in youth and, even more, with the formless grace of our nervous, sporadic games" (68). Having become the advertisement, Gatsby achieves a state of penultimacy in terms of his entrance into the society, so close that "he inspired . . . whispers about him from those who had found little that it was necessary to whisper about in this world" (48). Yet what Gatsby does not understand—what, in fact, the advertisement he becomes fails to mention—is that the secret society does not make room for "an elegant young rough-neck . . . whose elaborate formality of speech just missed being absurd" (53). That is, the secret society offers through its advertisements guarantees of upward mobility, even as it rigidly enforces hierarchy. The secret society maintains its adherents' entrapment within the process of striving. Hence, Nick, who occupies a middle space between society member and society applicant, might for a time be duped by Gatsby; Nick might at first believe that Gatsby's famous smile would belong to "a florid and corpulent person in his middle years" (53). Conversely, Jordan Baker instantly recognizes that this smile belongs to "'just a man named Gatsby'" (53) And Daisy, after visiting one of Gatsby's parties, is "appalled" to find a universe that

> wasn't a gesture but an emotion . . . that Broadway had begotten upon a Long Island fishing village—appalled by its raw vigor that

> chafed under the old euphemisms and by the too obtrusive fate that herded its inhabitants along a short cut from nothing to nothing (113-14).

Daisy is appalled to find that Gatsby has actually purchased the advertisement, has internalized it, whereas Daisy herself only proffers it. Daisy holds and exercises the power to make "the whole caravansary . . . [fall] in like a card house at the disapproval in her eyes" (120). Daisy can and does fix this Gatsby, names him—"'You resemble the advertisement of the man,'" she says (125)—and thereby reduces Gatsby to "standing there in the moonlight—watching over nothing" (153). Gatsby's internalization of the Dream does not grant him self-realization, but rather we find him at the end of the novel still entrapped in the Dream narrative's bipolar oscillations, before his death at the hand of a "mad man" (171). And like Nick, we are as witnesses left half-paralyzed by anxiety, half-searching for a distraction as a result.

Just as does James Gatz/Jay Gatsby, then, Willy Loman of *Death of a Salesman* also achieves penultimacy in his quest for self-realization through subscription to the Dream. Willy nearly pays off his mortgage; nearly sends his eldest son, Biff, to the University of Virginia on a football scholarship; nearly attains a balance between urban and rural in choosing to live in the suburbs. Yet in a manner Gatsby never truly does, Willy, early on in *Death of a Salesman*, has started to see his self-construction's fundamentally farcical nature. As he tells his wife, Linda, an American may, "Work a lifetime to pay off a house. You finally own it, and there's nobody to live in it" (4). But even as he debunks the Dream, Willy proves committed to its preservation. He cannot cease performing his way into a self-assurance of being "vital in New England" (4).[6] Hence, Willy oscillates between total faith and total disbelief in the Dream. Miller suggests that had Willy pursued work that connected him in a tangible manner to his environment, he may have escaped this oscillation—a possibility Miller leaves open to Biff, although not to Willy himself. As Ronald Hayman writes in *Arthur Miller*, "Living in an atmosphere of sales talk, and making his livelihood out of sales talk, [Willy] can no longer think in any other terms" (38). Willy is a "man who is trying to sell ideas that have already been sold to him" (Hayman 48). The

statements Willy's neighbor Charley offers in the play's requiem prove quite apt. Willy is "a man way out there in the blue, riding on a smile and a shoeshine. And when they start not smiling back—that's an earthquake" (Miller 111).

Death of a Salesman opens with Willy's first attempt to tell Linda of his fragmentation, to describe to her the disintegration of his character. The play opens, in other words, with Willy's first stab at a cessation of performance, his initial try to excise himself from the advertisement, from the Dream, that he has sold to himself and others for many years. On his return from his latest sales trip, Willy says, "I suddenly couldn't drive any more. The car kept going off on to the shoulder, y'know?" (3). Willy vocalizes here his inability to sustain a mirage of resplendent self-importance, a theme Willy tries to broach later in the play with his brother, Ben; his boss, Howard; and Charley, among other characters. This mirage is a buying and selling of hope, an internalized metonym for America's metalevel cycle of production and consumption. This mirage is that which creates Willy's psychic shifts between unadulterated idealism and fatalism, the shifts of advertising. In Willy's mind, Biff is at one moment "a lazy bum," while in the next instant, "He's not lazy," just a slow starter, "Like Thomas Edison, I think" (5-7). Willy's mirage is a religion defined by an adherence to Ben, "success incarnate" (27)—an adherence to the possibility that Ben "Walked into a jungle, and comes out, the age of twenty-one, and he's rich!" (28). Willy expresses a faith that in America, "Someday I'll have my own business, and I'll never have to leave home any more" (18); this, even as Willy decrees, "That goddamn Chevrolet, they ought to prohibit the manufacture of that car!" (23).

What truly is tragic is that this bipolar dis-ease Willy no longer can sustain establishes itself as an endemic force within the Loman home. It is this that causes Biff to balk at investing himself in anything, for, as Biff states, Willy "blew me so full of hot air I could never stand taking orders from anybody! . . . I had to be boss big shot in two weeks" (105). This dis-ease causes Happy to despise his work to the point at which he sleeps with managers' fiancées, all the while Dreaming of becoming a manager himself—concluding at the end of the play, "I'm staying right in this city, and I'm gonna beat this racket!" (111). It is this that encourages Linda

to enable Willy's grandiose self- and familial constructions, even as she pronounces him, "A small man'" who " 'is exhausted" (40). And so Willy, left with no one to whom he may turn, remains unto his death "in a race with the junkyard" (54). He remains, as The Woman states, "the saddest, self-centeredest soul I ever did *see-saw*" (91, my emphasis).

Despite the near-naturalistic manner in which Willy's disintegration unfolds in *Death of a Salesman*, Miller does outline a clear-cut alternative to his protagonist's purchase of the Dream. Halfway through the play's requiem, it is Biff who says of Willy, "Charley, the man didn't know who he was" (111). This statement is the culmination of Biff's ongoing attempt to "make any sense out of it," a project Biff in Act 2 fears he is "just not smart enough" to effect (102). Biff realizes by the play's end that Willy "had the wrong dreams," and that by contrast, as he tells Happy, "I know who I am, kid" (111). Who Biff is—or, perhaps more accurately, who Biff appears resolved to become—is the Willy Willy could have been, Willy minus the advertising-spawned fractured mind. Biff understands that the Loman family shared "a lot of nice days" (110), days in which Willy the salesman receded, allowing Willy the man-of-work to surface. Biff states:

> When he'd come home from a trip; or on Sundays, making the stoop; finishing the cellar; putting on a new porch . . . You know something, Charley, there's more of him in that front stoop than in all the sales he ever made (110).

Biff seems to have released his own adherence to the Dream, his belief that one must "suffer fifty weeks of the year . . . [to] build a future" (11). "Free" of this belief (112), to echo Linda, Biff may return to "This farm I work on . . . [and] the sight of a mare and a new colt" (11). By opening this possibility, Miller directs Biff and his readers to a counternarrative—a celebration of hands-on, holistic work, Miller's antithesis to " 'get[ting] stuck into something'" (11).

Presumably, Biff's release would entail his heading north or west, given that Nebraska, the Dakotas, Arizona, and Texas all are places in which he has served as a farmhand. In one of these locations, it seems, Biff may realize what Brian Parker terms "Willy's mystique of

physical skill . . . a reflection of the simpler, pioneer life he craves, a symptom and a symbol of his revolt against the constraints of the modern city" (97). And maybe, in 1949, Biff will successfully stage just such a revolt, for although the frontier had long since closed, much of the American West at mid-century remained at once steadfastly rural and open to cultivation by individual proprietors. Yet as readers we must ask to what degree Biff's example remains relevant early in the twenty-first century, when agricultural corporatization is as likely as not to either have forced the ranches on which Biff works out of business, or to the cultivation of genetically altered confinement cattle, hogs, and poultry. We must ask, as Jonathan Franzen does in *The Corrections*, how one escapes the Dream with "the whole northern religion of things coming to an end" (3).[8] As the twenty-first century takes hold, Franzen makes clear, Biff's "beautiful" country is reduced to "yellowing zoysia" (Miller 11, Franzen 3), with "The madness of an autumn prairie cold front coming through," as "Gust after gust of disorder . . . rained acorns on houses with no mortgage" (Franzen 3). The twenty-first century, Franzen states, has raised an "alarm bell of anxiety" that is "a kind of metasound whose rise and fall was not the beating of compression waves but the much, much slower waxing and waning" of his characters', of our, "*consciousness* of the sound" (3, 4, author's emphasis). It is through the family saga of the Lamberts—Alfred, the aged patriarch; Enid, his wife, the homemaker; and their grown children, Gary, a banker, Chip, an academic, and Denise, a chef—that Franzen explores a contemporary escape from the Dream narrative's internalization. As Thomas P. Edwards writes in "Oprah's Choice," "The world of the Lamberts is under vaguely felt but continuing pressure from big business and its dubious intentions" (84). The escape from this pressure, Franzen discovers, is not Millerian work, which no longer remains a worthwhile solution to fragmentation. In its place, Franzen posits a combined awareness of one's entrapment in a materialist culture and dedication to the creation of souled space.[9]

Franzen uncovers the failure of work-as-escape through his characterization of Alfred. Now in his seventies and suffering from Parkinson's disease, Alfred has retired to his suburban home in Midwestern St. Jude (read St. Louis) after some thirty-odd years spent as a railroad engineer with the fictional Midland Pacific Railroad.

Alfred has retired, that is, after three decades of performing hands-on labor that nevertheless engages the mind, the kind of labor that would seem to fit Miller's prescription. For the majority of Alfred's career, Midland serviced mainly small Nebraskan and Kansan towns similar, we learn, to the rural Kansas community in which Alfred was raised during the Depression and early nineteen forties. Although it operated as a monopoly, Midland held to its "civic duty to maintain service on its branches and spurs" (68). True, Alfred realized even early in his career that many of the "one-elevator towns" Midland served were dying (68). Buttressed by the company culture in which he works, however, Alfred still was able to nurture a well-rooted faith in the railroad's centrality to "a town's civic pride, how the whistle of a train could raise the spirits on a February morning at 41_N 101_W" (68). Armed with this faith, along with heaping doses of Arthur Schopenhauer's deterministic philosophy, Alfred exercised a work ethic that inspired nothing less than awe in his coworkers, wife, and children. Alfred was "a *man* . . . and he showed this, you might even say flaunted it, by standing no-handedly on high narrow ledges, and working ten and twelve hours without a break, and cataloguing an eastern railroad's effeminacies" (244, author's emphasis).

Yet near the end of Alfred's career, Midland is purchased by the Creels, tycoon twin brothers from Tennessee, and swallowed into a corporate conglomerate named Orfic Midland. This Orfic Midland, Franzen writes, "had joined the ranks of the indistinguishable bland megafirms whose headquarters dotted the American exurbs" (152). In an age of ever-accelerating play between abstraction and physical debasement, between economy-altering stock trades performed in the ether and at-home, self-inflicted medical treatments, Alfred's Schopenhauer-edged approach to being cannot meet the shifting exigencies of existence. His philosophy—the essence of which Alfred's eldest son, Gary, correctly characterizes as, "Never mind what's going on underneath. As long as we're all civil" (171)—proves untenable. As such, Alfred's home and body are folding in on themselves, slowly imploding, with "cracks in the grouting, rust lines in the bathroom sinks, and a softness in the master bedroom ceiling . . . the sag of entropy" (172). Alfred and the system for whose maintenance he has invested an entire working lifetime—the system of hands-on work,

whose assimilation into the Dream Franzen exposes here—have developed "A syncopated tremor so fundamental to the ship, and so similar to Parkinson's . . . that Alfred had located the problem within himself until he overheard younger, healthier passengers remarking on it" (239). Alfred's insistence on civility, the key component by which he asserts his individuality, has been muted by the contrary insistence of the abstract and corporeal to manifest themselves and prevent two autonomous men from sealing a deal with a handshake. So this "Bengal tiger that forgets how to kill, the lion lazy with depression"—this man who, when his wife "so much as stepped from the bathroom naked he averted his eyes, as the Golden Rule enjoined the man who hated to be seen himself"—no longer finds the "purely vulnerable objecthood" on which he and the system he has internalized depend (240). "The will [that] was in the track" and kept the railroad from becoming "ten thousand tons of ungovernable nothing" has aged irreparably (242). And this will has made no provisions for its own failure, because its previous success depended upon a rugged self-confidence that did not allow room for the contemplation of as much. Alfred, we learn, "had boundless energy for work, but as soon as he quit he could barely stand up" (271). Alfred is ironically left depending on his children for assistance, whose "nature [it was] to throw their arms around him," but which nature he had "corrected out of them" (250). It is up to the Lambert children, that is, to stop waiting, "like company subordinates, for the boss to speak" (250). It is they who must bring about "A little sweetness in the world," the "rich dessert" Alfred, beneath it all, "did therefore enjoy" (255). As Franzen shows us, "in the end, when you were falling into water, there was no solid thing to reach for but your children" (336).

To be precise, it is not really his "children" to whom Alfred reaches, so much as his second child, Chip. Neither Gary, the banker and father of three, nor Denise, the divorced chef, can meet Alfred's needs, for each represents one pole on the interrelated toughness/weakness and male/female dichotomies by which Alfred has interpreted being. Gary inherits Alfred's systemic notions, but none of his underlying humanity. Gary is "a strict materialist" who "wanted to preserve his good spirits . . . and to do this he needed a modicum of cooperation from the world of objects" (139, 138). Gary's understanding of "tak[ing] responsibility" for Alfred is to suggest " 'shock treatments or medication'" (171, 177).

Gary, whose "entire life was set up as a correction of his father's life," finds that "clinical depression was known to have genetic bases and to be substantially heritable" (179). Gary finds that despite his best efforts, he has become the workman component of his father, already somewhat entropied at the age of forty-one; hence, Gary is estranged from his wife and children, and is presenting clear indications of a developing alcoholism. Denise, in turn, inherits only Alfred's largely repressed humanistic sensitivity. That is, she inherits, but for much of the novel cannot act upon, Alfred's underlying, but paralyzed, desire to connect with a family. Confronted with the collapse of work systems, Denise, like Alfred, manifests a desire to " 'go back to bed'" (198); Denise moves from relationship to relationship, job to job, manifesting little rationale other than a fear of commitment and a hatred of this very fear. She is the child in whose raising Alfred tried to "correct" the harshness with which he raised Gary and Chip; granted a "last opportunity to learn from one's mistakes and make corrections . . . he resolved to seize this opportunity . . . [to] treat her more gently" (278). Inasmuch, Denise, throughout most of the text, cannot turn a critical lens on the flaws of Alfred's systemic notions, for as she grew up he shielded her from their rather brutal edges; nor can she coherently criticize herself, given her alienating isolation. Only Chip, then, may meet Alfred. Chip is the middle child, the child whose existence is a potential middle ground extant between systems thought's pendulum-like swings to unfettered hope and depression. Chip is the child who may combine an intellectual understanding of Alfred's entrapment with an emotional commitment to Alfred's assistance—a commitment Biff Loman's newfound individualism at the end of *Death of a Salesman* likely would have prevented him from establishing with Willy. It is Chip to whom Alfred looks for a reconciliation of modernity's polarized consciousness, the oscillation between atemporal and temporal focuses—a reconciliation, more or less, of monological expressions of the Freudian death and sexual instincts. Chip and only Chip may answer why

> The human species was given dominion over the earth . . . but it paid this price for its privileges: that the finite and specific animal body of this species contained a brain capable of conceiving the infinite and wishing to be infinite itself (464).

The potential Franzen invests in Chip is tied to the latter's ability to exercise a "freedom" that derives from "that minimal burden of decoding spoken English" (262). Having earned a Ph.D. in English and worked for several years as an academic, Chip is the character who has developed the analytical ability to assess his own and others' entrapment within the Dream. It is this power that connects Chip to Alfred's fear "that everything was relative. That the 'real' and 'authentic' might not be simply doomed but fictive to begin with" (272). It is also this power that connects Chip to Nick Carraway and to the Biff who appears in *Death of a Salesman*'s requiem. Chip, in "his Foucaultian heart," understands that "wealth was concentrated in the hands of a few; any meaningful distinction between private and public sectors had disappeared . . . and the economy was fueled largely by the elite's insatiable demand for luxury" (441). To provide assistance to Alfred (as well as his mother, siblings, wife, and children), however, Chip must combine this freedom with a commitment to cease believing that to "'define yourself as a person'" one must manifest "'some element of rebellion'" against his or her parents (59). Approached from a slightly different angle, Chip must combine his rarified critical wherewithal with an emotional engagement with the finite—an effort that for Franzen constitutes the essence of a moving beyond teenaged angst into a meaningful adulthood, an effort neither Nick Carraway nor Biff Loman fully enact. Chip must assume the capacity to harmonize, to balance in romantic fashion, reason and emotion. To do this, Chip must exercise his will, overcoming in a Nietzschean manner a fear of engaging the temporal. And this is precisely what Chip does—what, Franzen suggests, remains possible both for Chip and *The Corrections*'s readers. As Franzen writes, "No man likes to see his cowardice as clearly as Chip could see his now . . . but the fact remained that he was afraid to go home, and this was nobody's fault but his" (454). As Biff Loman would implore, Chip must come to know himself. The means by which Chip accomplishes as much are represented by his coming to know "that he could bring joy to another person" (455)—that even in the America of today, amid the absurdities of late capitalism, one may create souled space. It is only when Chip "lost track of what he wanted," therefore, that Alfred opens "the front door . . . in St. Jude . . . [and] seemed to know exactly who he was" (535-36). Alfred sees in Chip "a sweetness . . . that nobody else could counterfeit" (551)—a

sweetness that when allowed to surface permits Chip to care for Alfred, Enid, and his new family by the end of the novel, but which will not allow him to, as both Alfred and Gary suggest, " 'put an end to it!'" (556). Through Chip, then, Franzen shows us that it, the Dream narrative, will continue. Yet Franzen also shows us that the Dream may be shifted, that its terms may be humanized.

Notes

[1] In *Player Piano* (1952), the novel from which I draw this quotation, Vonnegut concretizes this statement via his portrayal of Bud Calhoun. Calhoun works with the novel's protagonist, Paul Proteus, in Ilium, New York—Vonnegut's apocalyptic vision of a fully technologized world. Calhoun is an arch-pragmatist with a Southern drawl, a man possessed of "the restless, erratic insight and imagination of a gadgeteer" (5). It is this imagination, Vonnegut writes, "that had been remarked upon as being peculiarly American since the nation had been born" (4). Vonnegut's Ilium, then, becomes the "climax" of "generations of Bud Calhouns" (5). We see in Ilium the gadgeteering of an entire economy, in addition to the culture that both shapes the economy and is shaped by it.

[2] In *Christ and Apollo: The Dimensions of the Literary Imagination*, William F. Lynch offers a particularly apt description of the modern era's bifurcated consciousness, the back-and-forth play between contemporary man's wish to find a holistic humanity in the world and to circumscribe his world within rational categories. Lynch states, "We wish on the one hand to grasp 'meaning' to the full, so that there is no pain of questioning left; on the other hand we have an equal longing for pure unalloyed, concrete objects, and for not having to go beyond them to get at meaning, joy, or illumination. This double longing exists in all of us. We want the unlimited and the dream, and we also want the earth" (15).

[3] Brian Way's thoughts on this phenomenon are acutely accurate. In *F. Scott Fitzgerald and the Art of Social Fiction*, Way rightly states that Nick "is no less vital to the structure of *The Great Gatsby* than to its tone and meaning. He is both stage manager and chorus, re-creating situations in all their actuality, and at the same time commenting upon them. . . . thanks to Nick Carraway, Fitzgerald . . . moves from the

dramatic concentration of 'the scenic thing' to the rich texture of narrative without the smallest effect of incoherence or inconsistency" (99-100).

[4] As Matthew J. Bruccoli writes in his preface to the *Gatsby* edition from which I work, "Gatsby . . . believes in the American Dream of success ('the orgastic future'); he fulfills it; he confuses it with Daisy; he is betrayed by it" (xi).

[5] In "F. Scott Fitzgerald's Evolving American Dream: The 'Pursuit of Happiness' in Gatsby, *Tender is the Night*, and *The Last Tycoon*," John F. Callahan captures this decision rather beautifully. Callahan writes, "Fitzgerald's fictional alter egos, Jay Gatsby and Dick Diver, lost . . . [a] stance of simultaneous detachment and engagement, if they ever possessed it, for they could live in the world only with a single, consuming mission" (375-76).

[6] In "Miller's *Death of a Salesman*: The Collapse of the Dream," O.P. Dogra traces Willy's performance to Willy's desire to be "well liked." Dogra writes that Willy "shares his culture's conviction that personality is a matter of mannerism and in the sharing he develops a style that is compounded of falseness" (56). For Dogra, this style's development is the kernel from which the play's larger social critique springs. *Death of a Salesman*, he writes, "critisises the social system which gives birth to dreams and delusions. It exposes the life of nerve-breaking and heart-rending competition which is the natural consequence of the whole of society madly pursuing the idea of success" (56).

[7] It is precisely this ability on Miller's part to fuse a concern for the individual with a larger concern about the societal structures individuals inhabit that led Raymond Williams to celebrate Miller as the greatest of the post-World War II dramatic social realists. In "The Realism of Arthur Miller," Williams writes, "The key to social realism . . . lies in a particular conception of the relationship of the individual to society, in which neither is the individual seen as a unit nor the society as an aggregate, but both are seen as belonging to a continuous . . . process. My interest in the work of Arthur Miller is that he seems to have come nearer than any post-war writer . . . to this substantial conception" (70).

[8] Academic recognition has lagged somewhat behind mainstream literary celebration of Jonathan Franzen's work. As such, some readers

may be unfamiliar with Franzen, a writer originally from St. Louis who now lives and writes in New York, often contributing material to *The New Yorker*. Franzen is the author of three novels, *The Twenty-Seventh City* (1988), *Strong Motion* (1992), and *The Corrections*, which won the National Book Award; all three of these texts are committed to an aesthetic of social realism. In addition, Franzen has written two essay collections, *How to Be Alone* (2002) and *The Discomfort Zone: A Personal History* (2006). As the subtitle of the latter collection suggests, Franzen's essays almost always make use of autobiographical material, often employing the personal to establish narrative momentum toward a more-overarching social vision.

[9] Franzen's discovery of as much appears to parallel his own personal and artistic "movement away from an angry and frightened isolation toward an acceptance—even a celebration—of being a reader and a writer" (Franzen, *How to Be Alone* 5-6). In *How to Be Alone*, Franzen explains that he "used to consider it apocalyptically worrisome that Americans watch a lot of TV and don't read much Henry James"—that he "used to be a very angry and theory-minded person" (4). I believe that Franzen's ability to divest himself of a good deal of this theory has allowed him to establish an artistic lineage that stretches to writers such as Fitzgerald and Miller—has allowed him to become the best of America's twenty-first-century social realists, a writer who deftly balances concern for the individual and the social. Nevertheless, Franzen's ability to establish this equilibrium often has been met with critical suspicion. For examples of such suspicion, see Joseph Epstein, "Surfing the Novel," *Commentary* 113.1 (2002): 32-37; James Wolcott, "Advertisements for Himself," *The New Republic* 227.23-24 (2002): 35-40; James Woods, "Jonathan Franzen and the 'Social Novel,'" *The Irresponsible Self: On Laughter and the Novel* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2004) 195-209; and James Annesley, "Market Corrections: Jonathan Franzen and the 'Novel of Globalization,'" *Journal of Modern Literature* 29.2 (2006): 111-128.

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