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Jonathan Franzen: The Comedy Of Rage

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Introductory

Who is Jonathan Franzen and what is the comedy of rage? The first question is easy. Franzen is perhaps the best-known American novelist of his generation, all but uniquely capable of reaching both highbrow sophisticates and less demanding mainstream readers. A visual answer to the first question is even easier. Seen by untold numbers, the image of Franzen that filled the cover of the August 23, 2010 edition of *Time Magazine* (“Great American Novelist” plastered on his chest) is mesmerizing. (In case you missed it there, it reappears in this book’s inset sheaf of photos and images, as well as—slightly stylized—on its dust jacket.) Tousle-headed, bespectacled, looking away from the camera (guarding his privacy), the fifty-year-old Franzen wears a gray shirt and three-day beard. His face and body look outdoorsy, rough-hewn, vaguely all-American. He has the look of a serious (even severe) man, and this cover announces his status as national celebrity—virtually a fetishized idol.

For more than a decade (ever since the publication of his National Book Award-winning *The Corrections*), Franzen has been a prominent player on the US cultural scene. His notorious flap with Oprah (2001), his frequent *New Yorker* pieces, and his three books of personal essays—*How to Be Alone* (2002), *The Discomfort Zone* (2006), *Farther Away* (2012)—have guaranteed that he remains emphatically visible. His second blockbuster novel, *Freedom* (2010), gained for him a

readership even larger than the huge one for *The Corrections*. The two novels, taken together, took on the status of a phenomenon to be reckoned with—one that *Time* duly acknowledged by putting him on its cover as “Great American Novelist.” Since then, Franzen’s fame has remained at a high, at times almost unbearable, pitch. A number of his peers—notably women novelists—have complained in public that the lion’s share of attention devoted to him distorts the literary picture. It conceals from public view others’ no less remarkable work. Franzen agrees. The avalanche of attention is beyond his control, and he might have been as surprised as he was gratified. How did an insecure, introspective child and morbidly suspicious young intellectual—a figure adamantly distrustful of popular culture and its blandishments—become a twenty-first-century mainstream cultural magnet? More to the point, how do the suspicious intellectual loner and the mainstream writer idolized by millions (and despised by sizable numbers) come together as one person?

The answer to the second question posed earlier—what is the comedy of rage?—emerges as a response to the first question: who is Jonathan Franzen and what gives him his extraordinary hold on contemporary readers across the globe? To work out this answer properly is the task of my book. We can begin by noting that, deeply embedded in Franzen’s sense of himself (inculcated there during his childhood, his adolescence, and his elite college experience), there lodges a skittish and corrosive skeptic. This is a “liberated” mind that looks upon much of the human drama around him—both zoom-lens specific and wide-angle general—with scorn, even rage. Why, such a mind often wonders, are people so foolishly caught up in routines that a modicum of self-awareness might save them from? *Why do they*

seem to be sleepwalking through their lives? Before dismissing as mere misanthropy Franzen's urge to critique and decry, we might note that it gives his work its negative energy, its edgy charge and verve. It also has ensured (less pleasantly) that Franzen's relation to himself and to the world at large is riddled with distrust. This is a man who can take little for granted—certainly not himself—and who has had (slowly and painfully) to learn the cost of his own estrangement.

During the mid-1990s—through a process that is ultimately mysterious, though I shall do my best to unpack it—he manages to analyze the distress caused by his relentless critical energies. He becomes capable of granting that the elements of his world (including himself in it) are *all right*. Troubled and troublemaking, but all right: deserving to exist, even to be loved. Franzen comes to recognize that, however defective, he (like other men and women) has not only been given love by others but is capable of giving it as well. “What I came to consider [as] the money in the bank,” he told me in an October 2013 interview, “was that people loved me, and that came to seem like the key to everything. Not merely creating characters who could function as psychological objects, but making sure that love was implicit in the relationship between the author and the character.” The oppositional encounter of rage and love produces—as Franzen's novelistic signature—the inimitable comedy of his work. Franzen's comedy unfolds (in the writer, on the page) when the corrosive insights of rage and alienation, accommodated and made bearable by the generosity of love, grasp the human drama (his own, that of others) in its comic pathos.

His novelistic signature, yes, but an inherently unstable one. Each of the two stances toward the world that enable Franzen's

comedy—rage and love—threatens to take over the writing enterprise, to register an indiscriminate No (rage) or Yes (love). Indeed, love is a latecomer to Franzen’s sense of himself and understanding of his work. No reader of Franzen’s first two novels would identify love for his cast of characters as a driving energy. Corrosive rage (as I shall show later) holds sway. Moreover, his stance of radical critique—an inexhaustible dislike of what he finds all around him—does not simply mellow out in Franzen’s later years. *The Kraus Project* (Franzen’s last book prior to his just-appearing new novel, *Purity*) is studded with Swiftian diatribes against the mindlessness of online American culture. (An instance: “The actual substance of our daily lives is total electronic distraction” [KP 14]: no need for nuance here.)

No less than rage, love is also susceptible to overreach, at risk of turning into an all-accepting sentimentality or problem-eluding refusal of distinctions. In his desire to reach a broader mainstream audience and have them love him, Franzen sometimes allows his later fiction—especially *Freedom*—to make reader-currying moves he would not have permitted earlier. Rage (the energy of attack and critique) and love (the energy of acceptance and embrace) drive Franzen’s work, giving it both power and instability. Let me put the point more forcefully. These impulses are as incompatible as they are constitutive: without the tension between them there would be no body of fiction to consider. Without his exceptional alertness to nastiness (what his newest novel treats as “impurities”) in all its forms, Franzen’s Yes would lose its bite and bracingness. It is a Yes that has come through countless wars of No.

The Comedy of Rage seeks to unpack Franzen’s developmental arc as a person and a writer. It moves from his ultrasensitive, no-one-understands-me St. Louis childhood through his spectacular ascent

into today's literary pantheon. This arc passes through Franzen's heady years at Swarthmore College and his subsequent marriage with a gifted college classmate, Valerie Cornell. Both of them—would-be writers by the time they were twenty—committed themselves, all but religiously, to undergoing the lonely apprenticeship required to write the Great American Novel. Within a dozen years their joint project had run out of air, collapsing under the weight of its incessant and estranging idealism. Miserable, his marriage in ruins, Franzen managed to eke out two brilliantly rage-driven, critically acclaimed (though hardly best-selling) novels. By the mid-1990s, though, his most deeply held ideas about who he was—as husband, writer, and citizen—had become bankrupt. Angry and depressed by the consequences of his own life choices, he began to reassess himself: to see through the stance of superior alienation from the commonplaces of mainstream culture—a stance that he had long taken as a requirement of genius itself. In short, Franzen could no longer afford to remain the person he had worked hard to become.

Throughout the later 1990s, Franzen struggled to reconceive himself. More, he sought a writerly stance that might more generously accommodate both himself and his world. Arduously correcting himself, he achieved his goal with *The Corrections* (2001). A self-corrected man, yes, but certainly no poster child for the blandishments of mainstream culture. The literature of bathos, of easy pleasures and commercial, market-driven solutions to human dilemmas, did not serve as a mirror in which he could recognize his own labor and ambition. No surprise, then, that a little later in 2001 came the misunderstanding with Oprah. Having invited him onto her TV show because of *The Corrections* (it was too winning to ignore), she swiftly disinvited him after hearing

of his supposed concern about her middlebrow aura. She was not misled. He had expressed to various people his anxiety about being “Oprah-ed” (my word, not his). He was uneasy about being linked indiscriminately to other novelists she had anointed but whose work he did not respect, and she got wind of his discontent.

Notorious now as *The Man Who Dissed Oprah*, Franzen became public property. Without having to pass through the experience of reading his books, great numbers of Americans felt entitled to a view of him (usually astringent: he was not forgiven for crossing Oprah). From being relatively unknown, he became, almost overnight, glaringly well known: well known as a young man so self-engorged that he could not find it in himself to accept without quibbling a TV invitation from Oprah Winfrey. Franzen thus became a writer whom countless readers pegged as someone they would need to come to terms with, would have to figure out. Many assumed they would not like what they came up with, but his treatment of Oprah made him distinctive, even unique. He would spend the next decade trying to explain/explain away this flap.

Indeed, no one has abetted the journey of figuring Franzen out more than Franzen himself. Ever since 2002, he has sought to reveal his thoughts and feelings—the *becoming* of Jonathan Franzen—in a stream of personal essays and interviews. These revelations have been at once intimate and artful. The person on the autobiographical page does not coincide with the one in the living body. The one on the page is a *persona*—Franzen exposed, but also Franzen masked by Franzen’s words—as he explained to me: “And paradoxically, I really was trying to restore a sphere of privacy by writing autobiographically. Like I’m going to put the official narrative, I’m going to order it, I’m going

to put it out there, and it will become a bulwark within which I can continue to have a private life" (Int).

This thoughtful remark answers one question even as it raises another. The easiest way to "continue to have a private life," one would think, is to avoid "putting it out there," for others to read about. It follows that working out the ratio between the intimately revealing and the artfully disguising in Franzen's nonfictional writings has been a challenge throughout the writing of this book. As mentioned earlier, I have personally known him for over two decades, ever since his returning to Swarthmore College to teach creative writing in the early 1990s. From that point on, we have communicated intermittently about his novels, and I interviewed him in late 2013. Yet the portrait of the writer and his novels that I put forth here builds largely on materials he has provided in published essays. More importantly, I make no claim that he would endorse my way of construing either his life or his art. The secrets on offer here have for the most part remained hidden in plain (and public) view.

Once more, then, who is Jonathan Franzen? He is the fifty-year-old Olympian writer on the cover of *Time Magazine*, sufficient to himself, needing no one. He is, no less, the "fundamentally ridiculous person" (his phrase) of his childhood: insecure, misunderstood. This little boy (and the young adult he becomes at Swarthmore) failed to "score" (his term, again)—as dramatically as the figure on the cover of *Time* has won all the prizes. In between is the angry young man dedicated to an emotional and artistic pathway whose elitist isolation threatens to shut it down.

He pursues these ideals as long as he can, straining and eventually ruining his marriage. He publishes two alienated, tricky novels—both

premised on the idea that America is hopelessly blind to the damage wrought by its capitalist greed, its soulless culture. He brims over with frustration and discontent: why is everyone else so stupid? Then, his back to the wall, he begins to grasp the sources of his own unhappiness—that stupidity starts with himself, with his relation to the world. A new Franzen begins to surface in the 1990s, writing two magnificent novels in the first decade of the new century, revisiting—by way of intimate essays—his own life story, and (during much of 2011) revising *The Corrections* for an intended TV miniseries.

Franzen the loner has told us, in intricate detail, how he had to disable his computer so that it would stop receiving all those unwanted calls from the ambient culture: would stop so that, finally, he could remount his own imagination and find, latent there and waiting for him (once the noise died down), the two big novels that have made him famous. “I worry that the ease and incessancy of communication with electronic media short-circuits the process whereby you go into deep isolation with yourself,” he told Manjula Martin in “The Scratch Interview” (October 13, 2013); “you withdraw from the world so as to be able to hear the world better and know yourself better, and you produce something unique.” Franzen the loner is, as well, Franzen the birder (he travels the globe as a bird-watcher). Whatever else this passion signifies, it testifies to a desire to escape human company, to leave the teeming urban scene, to exit for a while from the routines of social performance. Birding may best embody his idea of “how to be alone,” as the following panegyric to unbridled selfhood suggests:

To be hungry all the time, to be mad for sex, to not believe in global warming, to be shortsighted, to live without thought of your

grandchildren, to spend half your life on personal grooming, to be perpetually on guard, to be compulsive, to be habit-bound, to be avid, to be unimpressed with humanity, to prefer your own kind: these were all ways of being like a bird. (DZ 189)

Would you please let me be my warts-and-all self, in all my creaturely (in)difference, so such a passage pleads.

Yet, Franzen the anonymous global wanderer is also a highly visible New Yorker. He writes regularly for the city's most prestigious magazine; he gives interview after interview; he wants to be *known*. We possess his vignette of the disabled computer only because Franzen has chosen to pass it on to us. His desire to reach out to his limitless readership equals—if not trumps—his concern to remain invisible. That desire carries, as well, an inchoate longing to be loved for who he really is, and thus he tirelessly corrects mistaken notions of his identity. His *Freedom* website has an enormous number of hits. His Facebook page has untold numbers of followers and a dashing photo of himself. He has been invited to the White House and met President Obama! So willing has he been to share his intimate thoughts and feelings with his fans in mainstream culture that he has proclaimed (publicly enough for it to have been emblazoned in bold letters on his website) that "Shame made it impossible for me to write for a decade." Shame? Or is such a proclamation of shame something closer to shameless? Or do we need another term altogether in order to characterize a reaching out to one's public that is, if not shameless, then, say, Dickensian in its conviction that he (the writer) matters to them (his readers) so much that he *must* cue them in to his actual thoughts and feelings? Something like this conviction surfaced in

my interview with Franzen when I asked him why he would ask his readership to take on something as esoteric and daunting as his translation of Karl Kraus's venomous essays written a century ago. He replied: "The impulse behind it [*The Kraus Project*] is, if I have that, how can I not show it to the reader? That's the compact with the reader. I'm not going to hide from you." That last you is the reader: how can I not show you what "I have" in me, Franzen was claiming. In his mind, he owes it and his reader wants it.

Franzen has been immersed to the hilt in the mainstream culture he so long despised. That he was not planning to exit soon from this immersion is revealed by his having agreed to screen-write an HBO production of *The Corrections*. Yet there are numerous indications that the coterie writer in him has not disappeared. He alludes, often and revealingly, to his friendship with the mandarin writer David Foster Wallace, whose suicide he has lamented in print—lamented so insistently as perhaps to imply to his host of readers: yes, I am the mainstream writer you trust, but I am also—and just as importantly—the soul-mate of David Foster Wallace, the nonpareil genius of our time. Jonathan Franzen continues to bristle with contradictory leanings, his elitist allegiances still messing with his populist desires.

Such contradictions are only underscored by HBO's decision, in May 2012, to cancel their commitment to *The Corrections*, despite a fortune already spent and a crew to die for. Even for someone with Franzen's remarkable appeal, attempting to fuse the complexity of a postmodern novel with the mainstream transparency of a TV series carried a risk too sizable for the money-men. Freed from the TV contract, Franzen turned immediately (with huge relief) to a book-length translation of the "untranslatable" (his term) essays of the

early twentieth-century Austrian intellectual Karl Kraus. Could any project—proceeding by way of gargantuan footnotes and centering on Kraus-and-Franzen's scathing indictments of modern technology—differ more provocatively from writing a mainstream TV adaptation of *The Corrections*?

Moving back and forth among Franzen's essays and novels, I propose to chart a single writer's odyssey. In so doing, I broach a larger inquiry into the dilemma of the contemporary American novelist's stance toward his audience. Does one write (affectionately, transparently, close-up) for the masses who populate mainstream culture or (critically, estrangingly, at a distance) for the elite who make up mandarin high culture? What does it mean to want to write for both audiences at the same time? Franzen's life and career, this book argues, oscillate abidingly—and often incoherently—between the polar orientations of rage-driven highbrow critique and love-energized mainstream appeal. He continues to fascinate his immense readership—and to infuriate his considerable body of critics (Franzen-haters, it is fair to call them)—not least because he is engaged in a high-wire act of reconciling what perhaps cannot be reconciled. We might figure these orientations as a circle that, for the past two decades, he has been working hard to square.