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Book Review by Cheryl Miller

RAGE AGAINST THE MACHINE

Freedom: A Novel, by Jonathan Franzen.

Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 576 pages, \$28 (cloth), \$17 (paper)

Purity: A Novel, by Jonathan Franzen.

Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 576 pages, \$28 (cloth), \$17 (paper)



JONATHAN FRANZEN DOESN'T DO HOPE AND change. Sure, his 2010 novel, *Freedom*, a chronicle of the Bush years—or “the worst regime of all,” as one character puts it—may have ended in giddy anticipation of the Obama presidency, earning the book a place on Obama’s vacation reading list and its author an invitation to the White House. But the honeymoon was short-lived. Near the close of *Purity*, Franzen’s latest offering, a character rails against “the disappointments of Obama,” which include “the concentration of capital in the hands of a few” and “the worldwide abdication of responsibility for climate change.” Her interlocutor, the millennial protagonist Purity Tyler (suggestively nicknamed “Pip”), hardly gives a shrug—she knows she’s stuck in this “shitty world of her parents’ making,” and that nothing can “alter the world’s shitty course.” Or to put it in the social-media argot of real-life millennials: “LOL nothing matters.”

Purity is a novel of great expectations dashed—except for those concerning book

sales. A canny manipulator of the media, Franzen ensured his fifth novel would be met with a firestorm of controversy not unlike the one that greeted *The Corrections*, his 2001 breakout success. Mention of his spat with Oprah Winfrey is now practically obligatory: she selected *The Corrections* for her television book club; he disparaged her previous picks as “schmaltzy” and middlebrow; she disinvited him. (He managed to patch things up just in time for *Freedom* to be featured on the show.) With the current contretemps, Franzen has riled up the digital hordes with his criticism of bloggers (“yakkers” and “braggers”), smartphones (“enablers of narcissism”), and Twitter (“unspeakably irritating”)—aspersions he doubles down on in *Purity*, comparing the internet to East Germany under the Stasi. In response, Franzen-mocking hashtag campaigns have launched (“#franzensfreude”); memes based on unflattering photos have circulated; angry, hyperbolic reviews have posted (“*Purity* is a worthless novel and its author, Jonathan Franzen, a worthless writer,”

Gawker declared). *Purity*, like *The Corrections*, thrived on the publicity, debuting at number two on the *New York Times* bestseller list.

FRANZEN HAS LONG SEEN HIMSELF AS an oppositional writer. An avid student of “theory” in his college days during the 1970s, he began his career as a hip, young postmodernist, influenced by Michel Foucault, writing against the illegitimate power structures of “late capitalism.” But the commercial failure of his first two novels—the dystopian satires *The Twenty-Seventh City* (1988) and *Strong Motion* (1992)—persuaded him that the novel was finished as a vehicle for social change. Writing in *Harper’s* in 1996, he announced he would no longer seek to be “socially useful,” to “Address the Culture and Bring News to the Mainstream”—the news being that people who think they are happy are not really happy, that people who think they are free are not really free, and that moral and political purity is impossible. The novel, he lamented, holds too



marginal a place to try to influence contemporary culture, crowded out by purveyors of “electronic distraction,” like television and the internet. Moreover, American culture, powered by a frenetic capitalism, moves too fast for the novelist to entirely capture it, let alone remake it—even as capitalism flattens and homogenizes society, killing off the “specificity” on which literature depends. Franzen concluded:

The American writer today faces a cultural totalitarianism analogous to the political totalitarianism with which two generations of Eastern Bloc writers had to contend. To ignore it is to court nostalgia. To engage with it, however, is to risk writing fiction that makes the same point over and over: technological consumerism is an infernal machine, technological consumerism is an infernal machine.

BUT OLD HABITS DIE HARD. THE INFERNAL machine keeps rearing its head in Franzen’s work, although nowhere is the point made quite as explicitly as in *Purity*. Through a series of interlocking, time-shifting narratives, Franzen moves the reader from 21st-century America, where a young woman, Pip, joins a WikiLeaks-style outfit in hopes of finding her mysterious father—and paying off her six-figure college debt—to the old Communist East Germany, where Andreas Wolf, the creepy founder of the whistleblowing site, becomes enmeshed in a criminal secret that threatens his already tenuous sanity.

What connects these plots—beyond the identity of Pip’s father—is Franzen’s insistent contention that American techno-consumerism is morally equivalent to Communist dictatorship. He uses Andreas to issue a stream of paranoid invective against the internet, which he calls “totalitarian” in the sense that it is “a system that [is] impossible to opt out of.” “If you substituted networks for socialism, you got the Internet,” Wolf explains. “Its competing platforms were united in their ambition to define every term of your existence.” The internet is the means by which capitalism can pervade all aspects of human life, turning every interaction, however personal, into data that can be monetized or commoditized. (Pip discovers this by way of a sexual encounter turned humiliation, during which she finds a series of boorish texts on her partner’s iPhone, bragging to a friend about her “8+” looks and cleavage.) And like East Germany, the internet, while ostensibly liberating (“dedicated to giving consumers what they wanted”), is governed by fear, in this case “the fear of unpopularity and uncoolness, the fear

of missing out, the fear of being flamed or forgotten.” These are the “terrors of technocracy, which [seeks] to liberate humanness through the efficiency of markets and the rationalism of machines.”

THESE MYRIAD LEAPS OF LOGIC MIGHT be dismissed as the rantings of a character literally in the process of losing his mind. But they closely resemble charges made in Franzen’s own journalistic voice, as well as by less crackpot characters in his other novels. Thus, in *The Corrections*, Chip Lambert, an erstwhile academic theorist who finds himself entangled in a zany subplot involving post-Soviet Lithuania, observes that the main difference between his home and his adopted country is the form of coercion used: “mind-numbing and soul-killing entertainments and gadgetry and pharmaceuticals” in America and guns in Lithuania. In *Freedom*, totalitarianism is embodied by Apple and its iPods, which cleverly co-opt the slogans and imagery of rock ‘n’ roll rebellion to better serve the capitalist

Prozac, sitcoms, MP3 players, YouTube videos are interchangeable devices by which the infernal machine exerts its insidious control.

order. As one character declaims, “The iPod is the true face of Republican politics,” reducing artistic expression to “Chiclet-manufacturing” and masking political coercion with the illusion of consumer choice.

Fiction may feed on specificity, according to Franzen, yet his treatment of technology and politics is curiously one-dimensional. It’s not just that he treats prescribing people antidepressants or giving them internet access as the equivalent of Communist repression, but that even within his critique, distinct forces in American society—television, biotechnology, the internet, social media—are rendered as the same. Prozac, sitcoms, MP3 players, YouTube videos—they are all completely interchangeable devices by which the infernal machine exerts its insidious control.

But it’s not Franzen’s politics that win him critical acclaim and commercial success—or not *just* his politics. Rather, it is the way that he has married his political vision to the traditional, character-driven domestic novel, lend-

ing his portraits of family dysfunction an aura of social significance.

Franzen borrows from Karl Marx the idea that the family contains in embryo all the antagonisms that later come to plague wider society. In *Freedom*, this is initially dramatized as a comedy of manners, centering on a household of yuppie gentrifiers, the Berglund family. Its opening chapter recalls David Brooks’s work of “comic sociology,” *Bobos in Paradise* (2000), with its self-deprecating itemization of upper-middle-class consumption habits. Take, for example, this catalogue of housewife Patty Berglunds’ day:

Behind her you could see the baby-encumbered preparations for a morning of baby-encumbered errands; ahead of her, an afternoon of public radio, the *Silver Palate Cookbook*, cloth diapers, drywall compound, and latex paint; and then *Goodnight Moon*, then zinfandel.

But this self-mocking soon takes on an edge, as Patty and her husband, Walter, an environmental lawyer, try to reconcile their liberal politics with their privilege. Franzen skewers the couple as “the super-guilty sort of liberals who needed to forgive everybody so their own good fortune could be forgiven,” who are stymied about how to respond “when a poor person of color accuse[s] you of destroying her neighborhood.” Ultimately, the humor curdles into self-hatred and self-disgust—what *Purity* calls “the logic of ick, the logic of guilt.”

IN WHICH DIRECTION THE CONNECTION between family discord and social disorder runs is never made entirely clear by Franzen. *Freedom*, in a chapter ironically titled “Free Markets Foster Competition,” examines how the competitive pressures of democratic capitalism distort intimate relations. Living under a system built on the imperative of perpetual growth, the Berglunds are filled with insatiable desires—insatiable because they have no object. The desires of each family member inevitably impinge on the desires of others, setting husband and wife, parent and child, in antagonistic competition with one another. Patty can only be free to follow her desires at the expense of her husband; the Berglunds’ children, at the expense of their parents. *Freedom* is understood to mean doing whatever you want, without impediment, absent any sense of community or social responsibility. Writ large, the result is moral collapse and social disintegration: marital infidelity, civic irresponsibility, military adventurism, and environmental degradation.



Freedom offers an alternative to this de-based notion of freedom (“the freedom to f[---]k up your life whatever way you want to”). As the Bush years come to an end, the Berglunds’ familial conflicts also find resolution, reconciling the estranged spouses with one another as well as with their children. Franzen telescopes this action such that we never see why Patty and Walter forgive one another or what enables them to live at peace thereafter. (Indeed, he seems to insist on the magical, mysterious quality of their remarriage by modeling it after the last scene of Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale*, where a long-lost wife is miraculously restored to her husband.) The Berglunds’ happy ending is achieved *deus ex machina*, both via a plot device (a convenient car crash that removes an obstacle to Walter and Patty’s reunion) and the coming Obama presidency. With this repudiation of the Bush years, a new politics, national and familial, becomes possible—one in which the excesses of capitalism are tempered by a concern for the common good and the Berglunds come to accept the limits on their personal freedom.

IN *PURITY*, THIS HOPE HAS SOURED. THE “possibility of significant change” Franzen felt while writing *Freedom* proves illusory, with a president too weak to take on Wall Street or fight climate change (or so the author grouched at a New York book festival in 2011). Franzen’s vision of human nature has also become darker: while *Freedom* suggests personal dysfunction is a byproduct of bad politics (and thus susceptible to social amelioration), *Purity* insists man is sick at heart, and this sickness, in turn, permeates our

society. The novel’s psychology is decidedly Freudian. Its characters are driven by irrational impulses, born out of past traumas, that they desperately try to repress or purify, paying the price in guilt and neurosis. Damaged parents beget damaged children, and aberrant mother-son and father-daughter relationships abound. Pip seeks out older lovers to assuage the absence of her father, making her vulnerable to Andreas’s predations. Andreas’s sexual crimes are spurred by his need to avenge himself against his mother, a monster of solipsism whose demand to be at the center of her son’s life comes close to incest. The deeply painful marriage of Pip’s mother and father is undertaken in rebellion against their own parents and breaks down as they repeat the same destructive patterns from their childhood.

Can Pip break this cycle of intergenerational repetition? Franzen’s ending is ambiguous. She reunites her mother and father, but her family is not miraculously restored as in *Freedom*. Instead, her parents pick up where they left off, full of “raw hatred” for each other. Pip leaves them, with her hopes for her future shaken: “It had to be possible to do better than her parents, but she wasn’t sure she would.” Her own coupling gives reason to doubt; she ends up with a young man the reader has earlier seen sexually humiliate her. The family inheritance she long sought now looks to be a curse: her parents have bequeathed to her a “broken world” and a history of family guilt and pain that she, “her mother’s daughter,” seems fated to reenact.

FAMILY IS DESTINY. IN *FREEDOM*, THOSE bonds, first struggled against, are eventually accepted, even willingly chosen. But its ending unfolds as wish-fulfillment,

whereby all the “loss and waste and sorrow” of the preceding pages is somehow magically healed. *Purity* allows for no such false comfort: family becomes a prison, giving lie to the “the dream of limitless freedom,” the uniquely American idea that we can remake ourselves anew. As Franzen explained in an interview:

Family’s the one thing you can’t change, right? You can cover yourself with tattoos. You can get a grapefruit-sized ring going through your earlobe. You can change your name. You can move to a different continent. But you cannot change who your parents were, and who your siblings are, and who your children are. So even in an intensely mediated world, in a world that offers at least the illusion of radical self-invention and radical freedom of choice, I as a novelist am drawn to the things you can’t get away from.

And so the infernal machine rears its head again. But what Franzen decries in *Purity* is not its victory, but its failure. American capitalism, for all its proliferation of choices and lifestyles, cannot emancipate us from the ascriptive ties of family and birth; who we come from irrevocably shapes who we are. Even when absent, as Pip’s father is, parents exert their influence over children in ways neither parents nor children can control. This is the tragic recognition that all Franzen’s work is built around, that his characters rage against, and that ultimately leads to the despair of *Purity*.

Cheryl Miller is a writer in Washington, D.C., and managing director of the Hertog Foundation.

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