Novelist Jonathan Franzen's *Purity*

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Purity *by Jonathan Franzen (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 2015).*

Purity is Jonathan Franzen's fifth novel. His 2001 *The Corrections* earned the National Book Award and was a runner-up for the Pulitzer Prize for fiction. It won the PEN/Faulkner Award the next year. The novel procured him an invitation to appear on the Oprah Winfrey show, which the talk show host rescinded after Franzen spoke unfavorably of the quality of work showcased there. *Freedom* (2010) gained critical acclaim, and advance publicity for that book put Franzen's picture on the cover of *Time* magazine with the headline, "Great American Novelist."

Both *The Corrections* and *Freedom* were novels of domestic life, concerned largely with middle class families. But they had—or attempted to have—broader social themes: they ranged over the lives of a variety of characters though decades. These long novels generated for Franzen a reputation, in official media outlets at any rate, as a serious novelist of complex social concerns.

A few citations from these assessments seem in order. In the previously mentioned cover article, *Time* wrote of Franzen: "His writing has an unshowy, almost egoless perfection." In another glowing tribute, this one in the *New York Times Book Review*, critic Sam Tanenhaus made the claim that *Freedom* "is a masterpiece of American fiction." Tanenhaus went on, "In his earlier novel, 'The Corrections' … the data flowed through the arteries of narrative, just as it had done in the novels of Dickens and Tolstoy, Bellow and Mann."

Not to be outdone, the *Times's* daily book critic Michiko Kakutani wrote, "Jonathan Franzen's galvanic new novel, 'Freedom,' showcases his impressive literary toolkit … With this book, he's not only created an unforgettable family, he's also completed his own transformation from a sharp-elbowed, apocalyptic satirist … into a kind of 19th-century realist concerned with the public and private lives of his characters."

In our view, however, both of these works missed the mark in regard to almost everything that is central to American life today.

The Corrections, about Midwestern parents, and their three children, a professor, a banker and a chef, was praised for anticipating a "post-9/11 mood." However, while the novel had a sardonic bite and some genuinely moving moments, it was caught up in the myopia and petty concerns that it attempted to satirize.

Freedom was a still less successful work. The novel was largely concerned with the small change of life in the liberal upper middle class—gentrifiers, guilt-ridden military suppliers, leaders of nonprofits—but adopted a smugness characteristic of those who had risen on the crest of the 1990s stock market boom. Franzen's book seemed unaware of or unconcerned with deeper currents of dissatisfaction and discontent beneath the surface of everyday life. The author, on the whole, did not seem to care for his characters much.

Both earlier novels allow the past to resurface in the present lives of characters (this is the case with *Purity* as well), but the past, especially in a broader historical sense, is just as unsatisfactorily thought out as the present. In treating both past and present, Franzen's examination is largely individual in nature. Where he examines social phenomena, Franzen does so in a superficial manner that is largely uncritical of and, in fact, beholden to official public opinion.

Purity is a tiresome affair. It exhibits little insight into the conditions under which people live at present and how those conditions act upon them (and how they in turn react). The book purports to explore aspects of the history of last century, particularly the final years of Stalinist East Germany, with a perspective that amounts to little more than right-wing stereotyping.

The novel is named after its 22-year old protagonist, Purity Tyler, nicknamed Pip (which suggests the protagonist in Charles Dickens's famed *Great Expectations*). When we meet Pip in San Francisco in the second decade of the 21st century, she is deeply in debt from her student loans and generally dejected. She does not know who her father is and her mother refuses to tell her anything about her own past.

Annagret, a German visitor who is staying in Pip's rooming house, recruits her to an expenses-paid internship with an organization called the Sunlight Project, a WikiLeaks-type group run from Bolivia by Andreas Wolf, another German.

Pip goes to Bolivia, meets Andreas, then returns to Denver. On Wolf's instruction, she forms a relationship with investigative journalists Leila Helou and Tom Aberant, who are coincidentally connected with Andreas, but hold the key to Pip's life story.

Over the course of several hundred pages, we pass from the childhood and young adulthood of Andreas in the German Democratic Republic (East Germany) in the 1980s to his encounter with a young Annagret, to the lives of Pip, Leila and Tom in the present day.

In the final sections of the novel, the personal and familial interconnections of the protagonists are revealed. Both the tragic penultimate scene involving Andreas, and the resolution of Pip's personal and professional conflicts, are quite strained and unconvincing. In the former case (Andreas), there is no inexorable logic to his undoing, no sense that events have to unfold as they do. And in Pip's case, the outcome strikes the reader as little more than sentimental.

The artistic problems of *Purity* have to do in part with the fact that almost no one is a credible, realistic character motivated by genuine, contradictory emotions or conceptions. The novel in general does not convince us that we are dealing with psychologically organic, interesting or challenging human beings. The plot depends heavily on coincidence. The evolution of the personalities—the plausibility of their actions in particular—hardly makes an impression. One cannot imagine meeting someone and thinking to oneself, "Ah, that is a real Andreas" (or Pip, Walter Berglund, or any of Franzen's other characters).

As in his previous works, Franzen does not demonstrate here much of a sympathy, critical or otherwise, for any of his creations. Andreas, who apparently exposes state secrets in the manner of Julian Assange, must have risked a good deal on numerous occasions to bring incriminating facts to light. But that dangerous and courageous activity is never related in detail, and lacks almost any political content. In fact, the author approaches the opening of secret archives and electronic documents with considerable hostility and artistic timidity.

During a slightly drunken dinner conversation with Pip, we learn that both Tom and Leila hate "leakers" in general and Assange in particular. A thread of odium against the man who exposed a series of American

imperialism's war crimes runs throughout the whole novel.

Franzen even has Andreas say, "The reason we're still thriving and WikiLeaks is going under is that people think Assange is an autistic megalomaniac sex creep. His tech capabilities haven't changed. What's changed is that people with dirt won't go to someone dirty." This goes unanswered.

A few pages later Andreas reads an interview with Helou (the heroine of the novel, if there is one), who comments, in a passage worth citing at length, "The leakers just spew. It takes a journalist to collate and condense and contextualize what they spew. … The leakers are more like savages. I don't mean the primary leakers, not [Edward] Snowden or [Chelsea] Manning, they're really just glorified sources. I mean the outlets like WikiLeaks and the Sunlight Project. They have this savage naïveté, like the kid who thinks adults are hypocrites for filtering what comes out of their mouths. Filtering isn't phoniness—it's civilization. Julian Assange is so blind and deaf to basic social functioning that he eats with his hands." This is foul stuff, appropriate to a right-wing blog or web site.

For a book in which exposure of state criminality is a central element the references to what has actually been revealed by Snowden, Manning, Assange and others are essentially negligible. The volume and magnitude of the disclosures, which requires a summary of more than forty pages on Wikipedia (and has been addressed in dozens of articles on the World Socialist Web Site), seems a closed book to Franzen.

Moreover, many of the political references in the novel are made in such a way as to suggest that reality is far less threatening than the headlines would suggest or "alarmists" would lead one to think. For example, Purity's initial contact with Andreas emerges in part as the outcome of her exploration of the disclosure that a nuclear weapon may have been smuggled out of a domestic American military base and driven around the surrounding area. It turns out that the object is not an actual missile but a decoy. The real-life events suggested by the episode—the flight of a nuclear-armed US Air Force B52 bomber over the US in 2007—are entirely ignored. The message seems to be that there is nothing remarkable in developments like this and that the public should simply go about its business.

Nor does one find a great deal that is psychologically convincing on the level of individual behavior. In the first half of the book, Franzen depicts Andreas as a self-absorbed and maudlin "non-conformist" of sorts in East Germany. The descriptions of his autoeroticism are tedious and add nothing to our understanding of the man. One of the central elements of the plot is a murder that Andreas commits to protect Annagret from an abusive stepfather. Artistically speaking, there must be a high threshold to establish the credibility of this strand of the story.

Instead, one finds the most banal and trite exposition. Immediately after the murder, Annagret says: "This is the real bad dream. Right now. Before wasn't so bad. This is the real bad." And in a moment, as he holds her Andreas thinks, "They were partners, and it would have been natural to go inside the house and seal their partnership, and this was how he knew for certain that his love for her was pure ..."

Is this how anyone reacts to murdering someone in cold blood?

There has been nothing in Andreas's development to indicate that he is capable of a crime like this, and, more significantly, Franzen has shown us nothing in the atmosphere of his upbringing or the state of East German society that would create such a psychological state in the young man.

The East Germany Franzen describes is one of universal monotone and suppressed creativity, exactly the long-touted anticommunist line. We learn next to nothing new about how its people lived or how they reacted to the collapse of the Stalinist regime. This is especially noteworthy considering that the author had the benefit of a quarter-century's distance. That is, a stereotyped and essentially false conception of history has given rise to characters who are shadows of people.

Andreas's later life is equally implausible. In semi-exile in Bolivia, nominally dedicated to confronting the corporate and governmental criminals and exposing their secrets to the world, he seems chiefly concerned with establishing sexual relationships with the attractive young interns in his organization, creating an essentially cult-like environment.

The real "moral core" of the novel, if one can call it that, are in fact Tom Aberant and Leila Helou. The two journalists are successful, conformist and uninspired by much beyond their careers, i.e., thoroughly bourgeois. In this regard they are much akin to the characters in Franzen's previous works, *Freedom* and *The Corrections*.

For her part, Pip never works up much steam to be more than simply in a contrarian mood. The other characters of the millennial generation fare little better.

Franzen's weaknesses are not simply his own. Many intellectuals took Francis Fukuyama at his word when he declared "the end of history" in the aftermath of the collapse of the USSR. There is a connection between the pessimism, self-involvement and enrichment of a layer of upper middle class professionals that followed the collapse of the Stalinist regimes, on the one hand, and, on the other, the loss of an understanding on the part of many artists that history has an independent and objective logic that is more than simply foul and despicable.

The poor caliber of *Purity* and the earlier novels, however, has its own particular evolution and intellectual origins. A strongly misanthropic vein pervades much of Franzen's work.

An exploration of this outlook could begin by asking: who is "pure" in the latest novel? Certainly not the leakers. Perhaps the "moderate" investigative journalists or the modestly cynical Pip, who refuses to take her billion-dollar fortune from her mother's estate … at least for the time being.

One suspects, however, that the point of the novel is that "we are all impure" and therefore more or less equally culpable in the social wrongdoing (corporate criminality, war, environmental destruction), which is acknowledged but never explored in great detail. And "we" are little better on the individual level. Apart from such an outlook, how could the author write the following about his reaction to Hurricane Katrina, as he did in his 2006 collection of essays, "The Discomfort Zone"?

"On an August afternoon six years after my mother died, while a major American city was being destroyed by a hurricane, I went golfing with my brother-in-law on a funky little mountain course in northern California. … My biggest worries of the day were whether I should feel bad about quitting work at three and whether my favorite organic grocery store would have Meyer lemons for the margaritas I wanted to make après golf. … With every ball I hooked into the woods or topped into a water hazard, my brother-in-law joked, 'At least you're not sitting on a roof with no drinking water, waiting for a helicopter to pick you up.' Two days later, when I flew back to New York, I worried that Katrina's aftermath might create unpleasant turbulence on my flight, but the ride was unusually smooth, and the weather in the East was warm and cloudless."

Here Franzen works hard to make a virtue of his cynicism. We are all "impure" and selfish, he implies, and I am slightly superior only by virtue of being more open about it. Nothing profound or moving can come from such an outlook.

According to the novelist, Americans (read average Americans) are destroying the world in a selfish pursuit of "freedom." In the novel of this title, Walter Berglund thinks to himself: "And it wasn't just religion, and it wasn't just the jumbo everything to which his fellow Americans seemed to feel uniquely entitled, it wasn't just the Walmarts and the buckets of corn syrup and the high-clearance monster trucks; it was the feeling that nobody else in the country was giving even five seconds' thought to what it meant to be packing another 13,000,000 large primates onto the world's limited surface every month. The unclouded serenity of his countrymen's indifference made him wild with anger."

Walter later muses aloud: "The reason the system can't be overthrown

in this country is all about freedom. The reason the free market in Europe is tempered by socialism is that they're not so hung up on personal liberties there. … And the conversation about rights in this country isn't rational. It's taking place on the level of emotion, and class resentments, which is why the right is so good at exploiting it." In case the message is lost on the reader, Berglund screams to factory workers: "WE ARE A CANCER ON THE PLANET! WE ARE A CANCER ON THE PLANET!" (caps in the text).

Franzen's writing represents an impasse but by no means the terminal decline of fiction in America. The growth of oppositional and egalitarian political sentiment will find artistically significant reflection. Franzen's mediocre and misanthropic output will be largely forgotten and provide no inspiration for this process. New novelists will look to the writings of the great realists of world literature, who observed the human condition not with cynicism, but with wonder and empathy, We close with a comment from one of Dickens's contemporaries, the Russian novelist Nikolai Gogol:

"Man is such a wondrous being that it is never possible to count up all his merits at once. The more you study him, the more new particulars appear, and their description would be endless."