Stephen J. Burn, *Jonathan Franzen at the End of Postmodernism*.

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REFERENCES


1 Although there have been several important studies on Jonathan Franzen’s work published in the past few years, especially after the commercial success of The Corrections, it seems there has not been any book-length study on the complexity of his artistic development yet. The title of Stephen J. Burn’s study of Jonathan Franzen’s fiction implies at least three things—that there is an end of postmodernism, that this book will be a study of Franzen’s latest works in the period of “the end of postmodernism,” and that it will be the study of Franzen’s work in the context of “the end of postmodernism.” Burn’s study of Jonathan Franzen’s works, I think, refers to these meanings but also offers a more complex and stimulating study of his works than the title implies. In the first chapter, Burn attempts to contextualize Franzen’s work within his generation of writers which includes -among others- William Vollmann, David Foster Wallace and Richard Powers, while he also identifies post-postmodern tendencies in the author’s work. Burn’s close and systematic reading offers a summary of the basic features of the post-postmodern fiction within the context of which he tries to place the evolution of Franzen’s fiction.

2 The analysis of Franzen’s theoretical and critical views as manifested in his early critical writing and short fiction discussed in Chapter 2, adds another dimension to this book—it becomes also a study of the relationship between Franzen’s fiction and his critical views on literature. This brings us to an important aspect of Burn’s study: it does not reduce the study of Franzen’s fiction to a study of the author’s use of post-postmodern narrative techniques, but it problematizes any strict classification of the novels by pointing out
the difference between Franzen’s earlier books such as Strong Motion or The Twenty-Seventh City and his most recent ones, including the now famous The Corrections.

Nevertheless, Burn attempts an outline of a possible evolution, if seen in isolation, of Franzen’s novels from modernist (The Twenty-Seventh City) through postmodernist (Strong Motion) to post-postmodernist aesthetics (The Corrections). At the same time, Burn points out the emergence of post-postmodernist narrative strategies even in early novels such as The Twenty-Seventh City as discussed in Chapter 3. Here, Burn does not deal with the modernist status of the novel but comments on Franzen’s use of postmodernist narrative strategies (intertextuality, metafiction) to finally conclude that “the ecological dimension to Franzen’s intertextual dialogue is indicative of post-postmodernism’s attempt to use allusion to direct attention toward the ‘real’ world outside the book” (67). This is quite a paradoxical although understandable statement—given postmodernist narrative tendency to highlight “the fictionality” and constructedness of the outside world as depicted through language—whereas Burn seems to suggest that post-postmodern narrative strategies apply complex narrative techniques to point out the physicality and “realness” of the outside world. However, Franzen’s reappropriation of traditional realistic techniques for the mimetic representation of reality may render Burn’s argument of Franzen’s adherence to post-postmodernism problematic, a point that would require further elaboration. But what is valuable in this chapter is that the author tries to identify the beginnings of post-postmodernism and the use of post-postmodernist techniques, especially a “deceptively traditional opening” (58), not only in this novel by Franzen but also in several 1980s novels, such as Richard Powers’s Three Farmers on Their Way to a Dance (1985), David Foster Wallace’s The Broom of the System (1987), and William Vollmann’s You Bright and Risen Angels (1987). None of these novels is discussed in detail.

The next chapter elaborates on Franzen’s novel The Strong Motion and the thoroughness of its research. Here, Burn notes Franzen’s use of system theory (Ludwig von Bertalanffy) applied to literature by Tom Le Clair, chaos theory, and ecofeminist concerns. This would again point toward the postmodernist nature of the narrative, but Burn avoids a clear-cut classification of the novel’s nature; instead he analyzes its complex metaphorical meaning reminiscent of, in his view, “the nonlinear conception of cause and effect that characterizes Lorenz’s butterfly effect” (87).

In Burn’s analysis of Franzen’s fiction, a large part is devoted to the analysis of the writer’s highly acclaimed and probably best-known novel The Corrections. Despite the use of seemingly traditional mimetic narrative devices, Burn sees the novel’s similarity with the apocalyptic millennial themes which can also be found in both postmodernist writing (John Barth, Don DeLillo) and in the works of writers he characterizes as post-postmodernist (Wallace’s Infinite Jest or Powers’s Gain). Burn sees the use of intertextuality in this novel rather as a postmodern phenomenon which becomes post-postmodern, as Burns seems to argue, by “the intertextual dialogue with Franzen’s postmodern predecessors” (92), especially with DeLillo’s White Noise and Underworld and William Gaddis’s The Recognitions. In addition, Burn analyzes this novel not only in the context of the postmodern authors’ influence on its structure, but also in the context of Pinker’s theory of the mind and theories of the self as well as Paul D. MacLean’s and Dennett’s neuroscientific theory of the brain, all of which manifest themselves in the complex composition of the novel. Finally, in discussing the ending of The Corrections, Burn points out the ambiguous interconnection between traditional realistic and metafictional techniques. An especially interesting point that Burn is making is that he interprets the
novelistic return to closure and the use of realistic techniques as signs of post-
postmodernism. This would require, perhaps, further argumentation since it is not quite
evident why this feature makes The Corrections post-postmodern and how it has
“corrected,” in Burn’s view, postmodernist narrative techniques.

Despite all this, however, Burn’s analysis is a fine, illuminative and perhaps even
provocative study not only of Franzen’s fiction but that of his post-postmodern
contemporaries, as well as the literature of the preceding generation of writers. It also
represents an attempt to outline a certain theory of post-postmodern fiction which would
perhaps require more research. The “end of postmodernism” as used in the context of
Franzen’s fiction seems to suggest not the end of postmodernism as a literary movement,
but its correction through the use of modified metafictional and intertextual strategies,
a return to “representationalism” through the use of various scientific theories
(neuroscience, chaos theory). Thus, I believe this study represents a significant
contribution not only to an understanding of Franzen’s fiction and critical views, but also
to post-postmodern literature as represented by himself and other writers of his
generation.

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