New Sincerity and the Contemporary American Family Novel: Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections* and Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead*

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Contents

Introduction

> "In the twenty-first century, American readers began to distrust books that came from the head – they wanted stories from the heart."
>
> Mark Lawson, "Goodbye Soldiers, Hello Everyone" (2010)

In 1993, David Foster Wallace anticipated a generation of writers who would rebel against what he portrayed as a hollowed out and commercialized postmodern irony by turning to rhetorical modes of sincerity, treating "plain old untrendy human troubles and emotions in U.S. life with reverence and conviction" (193; cf. Kelly). And indeed, a 'new' sincerity has affected North American arts and popular culture since the late 1980s and has been attributed as such to numerous artists and art works in the fields of literature, music, film, television, the fine arts, and the performing arts.[1] Around the turn of the millennium, sincerity further gained considerable public and critical attention. Jedediah Purdy, for example, published a treatise with the title *For Common Things: Irony, Trust, and Commitment in America Today* (1993) in which he criticizes postmodern ironic detachment as destructive cultural cynicism. In September 2001, the events which subsequently became known as "9/11" prompted declarations on the 'death of irony', the most prominent being Roger Rosenblatt's proclamation in *Time* magazine that "[o]ne good thing could come from this horror: it could spell the end of the age of irony" (n. pag.). In the following years, new sincerity continued to permeate public discourse, for example, as a regular segment on the PRI radio show "The Sound of Young America" (cf. Thorn), and generated substantial scholarly interest: The role of sincerity for public life and politics, for example, is examined by Elizabeth Markovits in *The Politics of Sincerity* (2008) as well as by Amanda Anderson in *The Way We Argue Now* (2006); characteristics

[1] For various examples of new sincerity in the arts and popular culture, see Fitzgerald, *Mother's Morals;* Fitzgerald, "Sincerity, Not Irony"; Magill, *Sincerity*; and Collins.

and functions of sincerity in literature are the focus of Susan B. Rosenbaum's *Professing Sincerity: Modern Lyric Poetry, Commercial Culture, and the Crisis in Reading* (2007) as well as of Tim Milnes and Kerry Sinanan's anthology *Romanticism, Sincerity and Authenticity* (2010); and most of the contributions to Ernst van Alphen, Mieke Bal, and Carel E. Smith's anthology *The Rhetoric of Sincerity* (2009) treat sincerity from a historical perspective.

This range of studies has recently been added to by two publications which contribute to the discussion in a manner that exhibits the conflicting positions of the debate: Whereas R. Jay Magill's study *Sincerity: How a Moral Ideal Born Five Hundred Years Ago Inspired Religious Wars, Modern Art, Hipster Chic, and the Curious Notion that We ALL Have Something to Say (No Matter How Dull)* (2012) focuses on the staged and manipulative quality of public declarations of sincerity (cf. Magill, "The Case Against Sincerity"), Jonathan D. Fitzgerald's book *Not Your Mother's Morals*: *How the New Sincerity is Changing Pop Culture for the Better* (2013) endorses articulations of sincerity as spiritual betterment. Magill draws on David Riesman's warning in *The Lonely Crowd* (1950) that a dominant focus on sincerity in politics is "vice" (Riesman 222), but extends this argument beyond partisan politics to the greater socio-cultural impact of the concept. Fitzgerald's primary focus is on art. His work both traces the allegedly "uplifting moral messages" spread by works of new sincerity and claims to be trying to "inspire you to do your part of new sincerity: to be authentic, to be true, to be good" ("Further Considerations" n. pag.). While their evaluation of sincerity is at odds – embodying the opposing ends of the spectrum of the critical debate – these two publications share a significant characteristic: Both assessments are evaluations of sincerity as a moral ideal.

In the present study, sincerity will be treated as a strategic cultural practice that first emerged in early modern Europe to build trust among the members of an increasingly diversified society and, in the course of the eighteenth century, became the basis and ideal of the

growing middle class. Articulations of sincerity suggest unrestricted access to a person's inner life, unveiling their deepest feelings. The apparent transparency of a person's intentions produces a sense of dependability that can serve to stabilize relationships within a community and consequently the community itself. Furthermore, a treatment of sincerity as a rhetorical strategy rather than moral property allows for the attribution of sincerity to entities other than human beings, making this distinction indispensable for the application of the concept to contemporary works of literature. Moreover, the distinction between sincerity as a moral ideal and sincerity as a rhetorical strategy is inseparable from a second differentiation, namely that between sincerity and authenticity. The failure to distinguish between the two concepts might seem inconsequential at first, yet it obstructs an analysis of sincerity as a rhetorical strategy of contemporary cultural phenomena. Both Magill and Fitzgerald employ sincerity largely synonymously with authenticity.[2] Both concepts refer to and qualify the outward manifestation of a person's (or artifact's) inner state – with a crucial difference: Sincerity refers to a congruence between public declaration and actual practices, while authenticity refers to a congruence between the *self* and actual practices. Authenticity therefore remains 'absolute' and ultimately self-referential, while sincerity is performative and necessarily incorporates an element of audience accommodation. To complicate this constellation, any practice of sincerity is successful only if it appears to be authentic, meaning that it needs to be seen in relation to a 'true self' rather than a public persona. The present study therefore begins with a systematic and historical differentiation of the concept of sincerity as a rhetorical strategy before applying it to a contemporary literary phenomenon: the 'renaissance of family fiction'.[3]

[2] Fitzgerald maintains that what he describes as new sincerity concerns the return of "authentic expression over manufactured image" (*Mother's Morals* n. pag.), and Magill claims that while "[s]incerity and authenticity take a long time to cultivate[,] […] [u]nlike nearly all other qualities that you can market, you cannot actually fake them" (*Sincerity* 234).

[3] The term renaissance has been applied to the renewed popularity of family fiction by various critics. See for example Fleig, Galli and Costagli, and Löffler.

Since the late 1990s, the literary family has experienced a so-called renaissance. While it arguably never disappeared in terms of the number of family novels being published, since the 1970s family as a literary topic was either consigned to the ranks of trivial literature or reserved for so-called minority literatures. Around the turn of the millennium, however, family fiction returned to the 'middle-brow' as well as the white, middle-class segment of literary publication and began to attract critical attention and appraisal in both cultural journalism and academic discourse (cf. Costagli and Galli, Richter, Snyder-Körber, Dell, and Löffler). This 'return' signaled a change in cultural climate: The seemingly antiquated genre of the family novel returned as a form evidently suitable to the articulation of acute contemporary concerns. Most prominently, the publication of Jonathan Franzen's bestselling family novel *The Corrections* in September 2001 coincided with the attacks on the World Trade Center, and many subsequent critical discussions of the novel have focused on this constellation, interpreting its conservative form and subject as the articulation of a retrogression that sprang from 9/11 – even though the conception and creation of the novel predates these events. Not coincidentally, the literary family shares the classification of being backward-looking with literary realism – the customary form of both family fiction and literary sincerity. The recent rise of a new sincerity and the return of family fiction have occurred simultaneously. While their correlation is neither exclusive nor exactly causal, these two socio-cultural phenomena can be seen to catalyze each other as they draw on the same desire for substantiality and stability. In addition to their kinship with realism, both the rhetorical strategy of sincerity and the family genre – as much as the modern family itself – are products of the middle class. They operate on the threshold between a private and a public sphere where they can be seen to maintain the production and representation of the private for the benefit of the public. A third commonality between sincerity and family fiction is their affinity to crisis, simultaneously promoting the need for stability and producing stability through trust. Taken together, they can be under-

stood to carry out affective crisis management. Accordingly, the historic and systematic discussion of sincerity as a rhetorical strategy of trust building in the present study is followed by an introduction to the family as both social and literary form with a view to these three commonalities: realism, middle class, and crisis.

How, then, is sincerity practiced by the individual? Moreover, how can this practice be transferred to the writing and reading of literature? Defined by Lionel Trilling in his study *Sincerity and Authenticity* (1972) as the "congruence between avowal and actual feeling" (2), sincerity is understood as the 'truthful' rendering of an otherwise invisible and inaccessible 'inner state' on a representational 'outer surface'. Significantly, the sincere representation of interiority takes place with an intention to communicate. Trilling draws on Polonius' advice to his son Laertes to elucidate this social dimension of sincerity: "This above all: to thine own self be true / And it doth follow, as the night the day, / Thou canst not then be false to any man" (3). Truthful communication with "any man" appears as the motive for the rhetorical strategy of sincerity. To appear truthful, the representation of interiority has to appear direct, unconstrained, and thus – paradoxically – unmediated. To evoke the unmediated accessibility of an inner state, the sincere representation of interiority assumes a rhetorical form that veils its own rhetoric and thus appears non-rhetorical. The effect is that of a seeming transparency and/or immediacy of the representational form. Transferring this conception of sincerity to works of literature, literary sincerity emerges as the writing of inner lives for the benefit of a readership (cf. Franzen, "Greatest" 62). Because the "semiotics of sincerity" (Taylor, "Why Do You" 22) demand an ostensible transparency of the representational form and/or an apparent immediacy of what is represented, literary sincerity relies on the employment of invisible narrative conventions. Contemporary family fiction fulfills both of these conditions: It is strongly character-based – with reliance on recognizable types – as well as dependent on the habitual legibility of the realist novel. While literary realism operates through tacit knowledge

that makes the family novel appear familiar, the extensive character focalization of the genre endows it with a "transparency of mind" (Cohn). In addition, the cultural concept of family itself has long become tacit knowledge – its genealogical form serving as an underlying structure to contemporary systems of social, and arguably also cognitive, order – and is therefore particularly suited to a rhetorical strategy striving for a transparency of representation.

In the present study, the literary sincerity of contemporary family fiction is exemplified by two paradigmatic novels: Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead* (2004) and Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections* (2001). The former is a fictional memoir in epistolary form, a literary practice suggesting a heightened immediacy of the narrative, both through the apparent presentness of the letter form and the intimacy of the seemingly private autobiographic form. The latter is a novel of multiple perspectives that creates a seeming transparency of representation by 'unveiling' opacity through the manipulation of the chronotopological structure. Both novels effect a 'depth' of figural consciousness through strategic shifts in narrative mode. This selection is motivated, for one, by the extensive public and critical response these two novels have received,[4] illustrating a common desire at the beginning of the twenty-first century for something "homely and real" (O'Nan, *Wish* 57), and for another, by the exceptional complexity and heterogeneity of the rhetorical strategies of sincerity that these particular examples of the renaissance of family fiction exhibit. Furthermore, the two novels are examples of two types of family fiction: the novel of generations, with a diachronic focus on family in terms of genealogy (*Gilead*), and the 'proper' family novel, portraying synchronic familial relationships (*The Corrections*). Both Robinson and Franzen are also prolific essayists, concerned with questions of art, morality, and social cohesion. Therefore, each analytical chapter of the pre-

[4] While *The Corrections* and its author have gained considerable public attention through the notorious 'Oprah scandal', *Gilead* has been named one of former President Barrack Obama's favorite novels, who further conducted an interview with its author, published in two parts in *The New York Review of Books* under the title "President Obama & Marilynne Robinson: A Conversation in Iowa".

sent study will begin with a contextualization of the work before examining the novel's literary sincerity through a narratological analysis.

In her non-fiction, Robinson develops a 'creed' of literary sincerity, without referring to it in these terms. Her conception of sincerity is informed by Adam Smith's conception of sympathy – outlined in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) – whereas her theoretical framework and terminology is firmly rooted in Christian theology, especially that of John Calvin. Her novel *Gilead* is shaped by Christian literary traditions, especially by the spiritual self-examination of the Puritan conversion narrative. This autobiographical practice integrates the private conversion experience into the public sphere through ritualized testimony for the benefit of the Puritan congregation, thereby employing rhetorical strategies of sincerity such as plain speech. *Gilead*'s spiritual self-examination takes the form of a practice of communication that is specific to the family, an autobiographical letter from father to son, with the objective of maintaining continuity as well as community between generations, reminiscent of the contemporary amateur literary genre of personal history. Furthermore, comprising four generations of men from the Ames family, *Gilead* is a generational as well as a historical novel. Its historical discourse on the Civil War, Depression, both world wars, and the African-American Civil Rights Movement – presented in the shape of a journal-like long letter – serves to stabilize values and world view between generations –between the fictional father and son as well as between reader and writer. On the narrative level, the novel's literary sincerity is determined by an effect of immediacy characteristic for the epistolary novel – the seeming presentness of the narrated events and proximity of the first-person narrator's mind. The narratological analysis of the latter effect adopts from Dorrit Cohn's *Transparent Minds: Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction* (1978) the terminologies of psycho-narration and narrative monologue. Finally yet importantly, sincerity appears in *Gilead* as a social practice – what the author refers to as "imaginative love" – allowing for trust and coex-

istence, despite "the inviolable, untraversable, and utterly vast spaces between us" (*Gilead* 234). In Robinson's novel, this social practice appears to fail in personal – meaning spoken – communication, whereas it succeeds when performed through literary mediation. Sincerity thereby emerges not only as mediated – in contrast to its necessarily unmediated appearance – but also as media-specific.

Where Marilynne Robinson is concerned with the 'soul', Jonathan Franzen is concerned with the 'self', and one could establish substantial differences in style and ideology between the contemporary family novels *Gilead* and *The Corrections*. The novels diverge in their political approach to so-called family values (liberal/conservative, atheist/religious) as well as their narrative form (generational/family novel, epistolary/social novel, single/multiple perspective, homodiegetic/heterodiegetic narrator). Both, however, are essentially concerned with the question of how the individual connects to other individuals as well as to the larger community, thereby placing themselves in the North American democratic tradition. Their shared response is a rhetorical strategy of sincerity that is particularly suited to the medium of literature: granting access to other people's hearts and minds by the way of the imagination without denying the mediated nature of literature. Consequently, the third chapter begins with an introduction to Franzen's "aesthetics of accessibility" (Freitag 12) and relates the novel to both the author's nonfictional work as well as such pertinent contemporary contexts as the millennial fear of an 'end of books'. The much-discussed 'Oprah scandal' is reexamined and emerges as a conflict driven by accusations of insincerity. Simultaneously, the analysis of this conflict brings out Franzen's media-specific conception of rhetorical sincerity through a juxtaposition of the representation of interiority in television as compared to literature. It becomes clear that he understands literature as a means for social connection, as a "middle ground" upon which "to make a deep connection with another human being" ("David Foster Wallace" 164). Therefore, drawing on the writing of sociologist Richard Sennett, the chapter

advances the concept of literary sincerity as a 'mask' for intersubjective communication. The second half of the chapter, as in the preceding analysis of *Gilead*, examines the textual level of the novel for narrative strategies of literary sincerity through a narratological analysis. Again, rather than judging the moral sincerity or insincerity of the fictional characters, the focus is on the novel's ostensible "nudity of form" (Peyre 313) in terms of its literary realism, its complex orchestration of narrative mode and perspective as well as its strategic unveiling of narrative opacity. Cohn's *Transparent Minds* and Jean Starobinski's *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Transparency and Obstruction* (1971) – the latter offering a "theory of unveiling" (73–80) – contribute the theoretical framework for the analysis.

Finally, the conclusion allows for speculation about the coincidence of new sincerity and a renaissance of family fiction from the perspective of literary history. Based on the preceding analysis of *Gilead* and *The Corrections*, I argue that the rhetoric of sincerity of contemporary North American cultural production – and of family novels in particular – is best understood as an effort to counteract social and cultural instability. The persistent sense of crisis in the United States of America since the turn of the millennium – social, religious, economic, political, moral – is further substantiated by the insecurity inherited from the "age of irony" (Rosenblatt) as well as the instability of meaning advanced by postmodern theory and literature by means of a re-establishment of trust in literary texts (cf. Miller, *Trust*). Sincerity, I posit, is part of the 'rhetoric of crisis' that determines early 21st century discourse. I further suggest that the return to individual subjectivity in character-based family fiction via the 'inner view' of literary sincerity reflects an attempt to regain a communicable subject position after its loss during postmodernism. Stable subject positions come under threat during periods of unprecedented social complexity as well as of a significant increase in indirect communication. Under the pressure of a continually proclaimed 'state of crisis' and simultaneous intensification of digital communication, contemporary authors draw on eighteenth-century literary traditions

such as the family genre, the epistolary form, and the rhetoric of sincerity – rhetorical strategies from a period that arguably witnessed the emergence of the 'modern individual' (cf. Armstrong, *Desire*). Yet, so-called post-postmodern literature is not simply a backlash against postmodern conceptions of discursive constructivism. As the analysis of the two paradigmatic family novels will demonstrate, the literary sincerity of contemporary family fiction contains the acknowledgment of its own performative and provisional quality – conceding the impossibility of truthful representation while at the same time emphasizing the social necessity of acting as if it were possible.

Drawing on established literary traditions, literary sincerity can be located within a cycle of transformation, governing modes of representation that alternate between referential/realist and self-referential/formalist literary styles (cf. Ickstadt). This oscillation can be observed in literary history since at least the eighteenth century. A comparison of the realism of this new literary sincerity with the so-called neo-realism of the 1980s shows the cycle to have reached a referentiality that strives not only for 'realist' representation but also for communication and even 'connection'. Robinson's and Franzen's texts attempt to engage the readers in a dialogue, rather than confront them with the ideologically constructed character of their knowledge of everyday life. Another reason why the white, middle-class North American family novel is currently experiencing a renaissance, and why this particular subgenre employs rhetorical strategies of sincerity, can be located in a discrepancy of feeling between so-called WASP and minority literatures of the late twentieth century which has been evocatively described as one between "the head and the heart" (Lawson n. pag.). The renaissance of the family novel, I therefore argue, partakes in a literary movement originating in minority cultures in which questions of identity and belonging determine the narrative. Alongside their deep investment in a rhetoric of individual subjectivity, both Marilynne Robinson and Jonathan Franzen – who write from the 'normative' literary tradition of Protestant, white, middle-

class North America – express and reflect in their works a lack or loss of 'tribalness' (Franzen, "More of the Same" n. pag.) – that is to say, a lack of community, of belonging to a group. Whereas family is particularly suited for the literary reinstatement of community – both as a metaphor for the larger social context and as the social origin of the relationship between individual and society – sincerity contributes the rhetorical tools for a seemingly transparent self-representation and therefore enables the trust necessary for intersubjective relationships. By thus discussing sincerity as a rhetorical reaction to social as well as representational developments, it is my aim in the ensuing chapters to balance one-sided arguments that portray new sincerity and the renaissance of family fiction as either naïve sentimentalism or cunning manipulation.

I "Homely and Real": Sincerity and the Family Genre

I.1 Sincerity: Representation of Feeling

"This above all: to thine own self be true / And it doth follow, as the night the day, / Thou canst not then be false to any man."

William Shakespeare, *Hamlet* (1603)

Failing as both a photographer and a breadwinner, Ken – protagonist of Stewart O'Nan's family novel *Wish You were Here* (2001) and the eldest of the Maxwell children – returns to the family's summer home after his father's death to settle the remaining affairs with his mother, aunt, and sister before the house can be sold. Although this last week is meant to be a family reunion – both Ken, accompanied by his estranged wife, and his sister have brought their children – Ken tries to make use of this vacation at the lake of his childhood summers to rekindle his artistic career. On an early morning trip to the nearby marina, his artistic ambitions repeatedly conflicting with his familial obligations, Ken is in search of a suitable motif:

> He thought of a whole book of fishing shots, the total subculture – men and their sons, their boats and gear – done in that flat style like Bill Owens' *Suburbia*.[5] It was precisely this kind of abstract thinking that got him into trouble. The Holga was supposed to make him feel the shot, not just see it. And he'd never taken Sam fishing, not once. He turned into the marina road and the trees opened up, giving him a half-mile view across the raised plain of the fishery to the highway. Vapor rose off the ponds, caught in the pasty gray tree line like gun smoke, a Michael Kenna[6] effect, majestic and fake. He wanted something *homely and real*. He hoped there would be herons, and that the Holga could get him close enough. (57, emphasis added)

The conflict in this passage is one of feeling and representation, reality and artistic form, immediacy and manipulation. It is also a meta-poetical statement for the writing of realist fic-

[5] Bill Owens is an American photographer and photojournalist. His book of middle-class domestic photographs taken in the San Francisco Bay Area, published in 1973, is titled *Suburbia*. See http://www.billowens.com/.
[6] Michael Kenna is a British-born photographer living in San Francisco. His work is predominantly of landscapes and known for its dramatic effects achieved through manipulation of negatives. See http://www.michaelkenna.net/.

tion: How to evoke true emotion through artistic depiction? How to make something realized through conventionalized representation appear real? How to achieve an effect that is "homely and real"? Ken's mentor advices him to produce work that is somehow true to his feelings, yet this seems to contradict the necessarily mediated character of photography, the unavoidability of convention and effect in representation. The aporetic constellation impinging on Ken's work is analogous to that of sincerity, which is understood to be an unmediated expression of individual feeling, yet depends on conventionalized signification. Ken ascribes his "trouble" to "abstract thinking," but my hypothesis in this chapter and in this study will be – reading the cited passage as a meta-poetical statement – that the "trouble" in this family novel and in contemporary family fiction at large is with sincerity and therefore with feeling and representation, with "feel[ing] the shot," and with achieving "something homely and real." The following section therefore unfolds the particular rhetorical constellation of sincerity as a communicational practice.

I.1.1 Rhetorical Forms of Sincerity

Since its emergence in the sixteenth century, sincerity has advanced to a keyword in such diverse fields as theology, sociology, economics, politics, and literature (Bierwirth 64). The moral concern with a person's sincerity has become, in Lionel Trilling's words, "a definitive characteristic of Western culture" (5–6). Over time, the extensive application of the concept has led to a naturalization of sincerity as a seemingly ahistorical moral virtue (cf. Taylor, "Why Do You"). Recent scholarship, however, attempts to denaturalize articulations of sincerity – whether political (cf. Markovits), artistic (cf. Taylor, "Why Do You"), or literary (cf. Rosenbaum). For instance, in a study that compares the European conception of sincerity with the equally complex Japanese concept of *makoto*, Gerhard Bierwirth demonstrates that sincerity is neither a universal moral quality of human conduct nor a monolithic concept, but rather

a communicative strategy dependent on specific historical and cultural circumstances. Semantically, sincerity is located within a field of tension between openness and self-restraint (Martin 1322–23), naturalness and artifice (Lindholm 53), dissimulation and politeness (Bierwirth 18). Depending on its evaluation, antonyms of sincerity (lat. *sinceritas*) are the negatively connoted lying (*menadacium*) and dissimulation (*dissimulatio*) as well as the more positively connoted prudence (*prudentia*) and politeness (*politesse*) (Bierwirth 18). To fathom sincerity beyond these extreme poles of interpretation as either *naïveté* or dissimulation, one has to understand its dialectic[7] constitution between idealism (introversion) and pragmatism (extroversion), its aporetic configuration as unmediated expression, as well as its performativity, i.e. the performance of self without postulating a self as the origin of subjectivity. Furthermore, sincerity is culturally and historically specific,[8] which means that, while it is essentially understood as 'truthful' and intelligible self-representation, how the self is made 'legible' depends on who is being sincere when, where, and – significantly – to whom. In the following, a juxtaposition of sincerity with the related concept of authenticity brings out this particular rhetorical constitution.

Sincerity and Authenticity

Sincerity is commonly understood as 'showing one's true self' or as 'being what one appears to be'. The emphasis in these paraphrases of the concept, however, lies on 'showing' and 'appearing' rather than on 'true self' and 'being'. The difference between these emphases is also the difference between sincerity and authenticity – between 'persona' and 'self'. As it offers a

[7] I am aware of the complexity of the term 'dialectic'. Whenever I draw on Gerhard Bierwirth's notion of the dialectical constitution of sincerity in the following, I use the term to mean "a contradiction of ideas that serves as the determining factor in their interaction" (Memidex Dictionary / Thesaurus n. pag.).
[8] Jane Taylor posits the cultural specificity of sincerity in a lecture given in May 2009 (Taylor, "Playwright"). The cultural specificity of the sincerity of Robinson's novel *Gilead*, for example, rests on North American (at least 'Americanized') and Western tropes of sincerity: the intimate letter, the 'poet priest' narrator, and the 'plain style' of Protestantism. The novel's audience-specificity might be deduced from the 'fictional reader' Robert, a boy belonging to the post-war baby-boomer generation.

definition of sincerity in a nutshell – neatly encompassing the concept's dialectic structure – Polonius' advice to his son Laertes in William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1603) is frequently quoted in scholarship on sincerity: "This above all: to thine own self be true / And it doth follow, as the night the day, / Thou canst not then be false to any man" (qtd. in Trilling 3).[9] The first part of the instruction recommends introspection and idealism ("to thine own self be true"), whereas the latter yields a pragmatic mode of social conduct ("Thou canst not then be false to any other man"). Taken by itself, the first part of Polonius' advice constitutes authenticity; taken together, all parts constitute sincerity. The difference between the two concepts is therefore related to the functions ascribed to them: being true to one's self as a means in itself (authenticity) or being true to one's self in order to be true to others (sincerity) (Trilling 114). While authenticity – defined by the OED as "not a copy" (OED, "authenticity, n." n. pag.) – is ultimately self-referential to the point of self-identity (i.e., 'true to itself'), sincerity encompasses both the idealistic, introverted side (directed toward an 'inner self') and the communicative, extroverted side (directed toward an outer receiver). The 'pure' and the 'pragmatic' dimensions of sincerity are inseparable, yet they have been awarded different emphasis over the course of literary history.[10] This dialectic structure, however, is constitutive of sincerity because it came into being as a mechanism to negotiate – at the threshold between an 'inner' and an 'outer' self – the relationship between individuals as well as between individual and society (cf. Bierwirth; van Alphen and Bal, "Introduction"; and Taylor, "Why Do You").

[9] Polonius' advice to his son is the most popular Shakespearean citation in scholarship on sincerity. Another common reference is that to Hamlet's employment of the travelling troupe's enacting of the truth as "forensic practice" to solve his father's murder (Taylor, "Why Do You" 25). A third consists of Touchstone's answer in *As You Like It* to the question of whether poetical meant "honest in deed and word, a true thing": "No, truly, for the truest poetry is the most feigning" (Shakespeare qtd. in Peyre 328). A fourth one, also from *As You Like It*, is the phrase that begins a monologue spoken by Jaques: "All the world's a stage, / And all the men and women merely players. / They have their exits and their entrances, / And one man in his time plays many parts" (Shakespeare qtd. in Patterson n. pag.).

[10] Although he maintains that both sides of sincerity are always dialectically intertwined, Bierwirth locates the highpoints of idealistic sincerity in Puritanism/Calvinism, in Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Confessions* and in the writing of the Romantic period (with its emphasis on simplicity, privacy, spontaneity, introversion, isolation, and exclusion as well as naturalness and nativeness). He locates the pragmatic aspects ('honest dissimulation', prudence, rhetoric, publicity, utilitarianism, politeness, trust building, loyalty, faithfulness and inclusion) in the earliest sincerity of the fifteenth century, the seventeenth century, and during the Enlightenment period (47–48).

In *Sincerity and Authenticity*, Lionel Trilling claims that sincerity was replaced by authenticity as key virtue during the Romantic period[11] and clearly perceives this development as progressive, placing higher moral value on authenticity (i.e., being true to oneself rather than bending to the authority of society). In the present study, however, the focus on sincerity as a dialectic communicational strategy attempts to displace the morality of a teleological interpretation with a systematic differentiation. While the concept of authenticity is ultimately self-referential – oriented toward an inner self with the goal of purity of subjectivity –, the dialectic concept of sincerity is concerned with the intelligible representation of an inner self for the purpose of intersubjective relationships. Its outward direction endows sincerity with the pragmatic dimension of audience-orientation: Because sincerity is defined as being true to oneself in avoidance of being false *to any man*, sincerity is inevitably oriented towards an audience and therefore innately dependent on its accommodation to achieve a degree of legibility that is perceived as transparency and consequently as truthfulness:

> No rhetorical effort can succeed if it fails to join in the beliefs and passions of the audience addressed, and that almost always requires some 'accommodation', 'adjustment', or *'adaptation' to the audience's needs and expectations*. […] If everyone assumed that to be sincere a speaker must sound exactly the same for all audiences on all occasions, our social world would collapse. (Booth, *The Rhetoric of Rhetoric* 51, emphasis added)

In this passage from *The Rhetoric of Rhetoric* (2004), Wayne C. Booth points out that any rhetorical success necessarily entails an element of audience specificity, meaning here that the rhetorical form that appears sincere to one particular audience may not appear so to another. Accordingly, not every attempt at sincerity is convincing to every audience at every time. What is more, a successful performance of sincerity will not appear to be accommodating, or at least not foreground its rhetorical adjustment. On the contrary, it will strive to appear uninterested in its perception, despite its orientation towards a specific audience. The reason for

[11] Sincerity is dated variably according to different studies: Trilling ascribes it to the Pre-Romantic era, while Peyre understands the twentieth century to be the "Age of Sincerity". Bierwirth as well as Sinanan and Milnes respectively date the beginning of a 'proper' sincerity to the Romantic period.

this is that any practice of sincerity is successful only if it appears to be authentic, meaning that it needs to be seen as a means in itself rather than a means to an end.

Sincerity as the 'true' expression of an inner self is thus aporetic: It is specific to its receiver, yet it is commonly conceived as non-rhetorical, meaning without artifice, intention or even self-awareness (Peyre 5). This paradoxical constellation has led Lionel Trilling to declare that sincerity and authenticity are words that are "best not talked about if they are to retain any force of meaning" (120). This statement is problematic: For one, it does not differentiate between sincerity and authenticity; for another, it implicitly emphasizes the purist dimension of sincerity while simultaneously neglecting its communicative effort. Sincerity is not – as Northrop Frye claims – "inarticulate" (qtd. in Peyre 329). On the contrary, its need for articulation ("Thou canst not then be false to any other man") is what differentiates sincerity from authenticity. The idealizing conception of sincerity as non-rhetorical is rooted in the original, empirical definition of sincerity as "[f]reedom from falsification, adulteration, or alloy; purity, correctness" (OED, "sincerity, n." n. pag.) as well as in a moral understanding of rhetoric as artifice, dissimulation, and manipulation. Yet, sincerity – the 'transparent' representation of an inner self – cannot be perceived as unmediated without being in some sense signaled as such (Benthien and Martus, "Einleitung" 7). Bierwirth refers to this constellation as the communicational paradox of sincerity – the unmediated expression of an inner state (19). This, however, is not to imply that authenticity is by any means less rhetorical than sincerity. In order to be recognized as such, authenticity has to be signaled as well; it remains, in Jonathan Culler's words, "a sign relation" (161).[12] Still, in my understanding, authenticity remains closer to the ideal of a 'non-rhetorical purity' because it does not share sincerity's instigation to communicate.

[12] The semiotics of tourism are a good example of both the necessary signification and unavoidable commoditization of authenticity (cf. Culler; Lindholm).

Sincerity is a normative term of ethical discourse, whereas authenticity was originally a legal term designating provenance and hence 'being', before it was taken up by moral philosophy. Sincerity and authenticity are easily confused because, in order to be successful, a performance of sincerity has to give the appearance of authenticity. As discussed, sincerity cannot exhibit its communicational element without discrediting its supposed lack of mediation: "Whenever 'sincerity' names itself," Jane Taylor summarizes this condition, "it ceases to exist" ("Why Do You" 19). Therefore, sincerity's rhetoricity is masked as non-rhetoricity, making it superficially indistinguishable from authenticity. The difference between the concepts, however, rests in their direction and resulting ease of comprehension: inward (authenticity) or outward (sincerity). Whereas authenticity, disinterested in potential audiences, is idiosyncratic to the point of unintelligibility, sincerity makes an otherwise invisible inner state 'legible' on an outer surface for the benefit of a receiver. Articulations of sincerity can thus be identified by their accessibility for a specific audience. Because of its unadulterated idiosyncrasy, a truly authentic expression of self must be ultimately incomprehensible to anyone but the speaker. Sincerity could in this sense be understood as an "enactment" (van Alphen and Bal, "Introduction" 1) or as a 'translation' of authenticity. Whereas authenticity designates a state – something either is or is not authentic – sincerity is a cultural practice or act, naturalized as a moral property of character (Sinanan and Milnes, "Introduction" 4). A synonymous, undifferentiated usage of the related concepts disregards the pragmatic communicational aspect of sincerity, facilitating a purist and thus moral understanding of both.

Sincerity, as the rhetorical device by which an inner state is 'truthfully' represented on an outer surface for others to witness, can be conceptualized as performance (cf. Rosenbaum; Targoff; Taylor, "Why Do You"; and van Alphen and Bal, "Introduction") and is thus inher-

ently tied up with the discourses of acting and theater.[13] Arguably the most prominent critical writing on acting in terms of sincerity is Denis Diderot's *The Paradox of Acting* (1773). Diderot argues that, in order to convince an audience, the emotion that an actor is portraying cannot be authentic:

> What, then, is the true talent? That of knowing well *the outward symptoms of the soul* we borrow, of *addressing ourselves to the sensations of those who hear and see us*, of deceiving them by the imitation of these symptoms, by an imitation which aggrandizes everything in their imagination, and which becomes the measure of their judgment; for *it is impossible otherwise to appreciate that which passes inside us*. And after all, what does it matter to us whether they feel or do not feel, so long as we know nothing about it. He, then, who best knows and best *renders, after the best conceived ideal type, these outward signs*, is the greatest actor. (74, emphasis added)

In accordance with what has so far been said about sincerity being an audience-specific rhetorical strategy, Diderot argues that, because it is "impossible otherwise to appreciate" the inner state from an outsider's perspective, the actor/actress has to, firstly, imitate the particular "outward symptoms" of an emotional state and, secondly, address himself/herself to the "sensations" of the specific audience. Diderot pronounces the actor's/actress' actual feelings to be not only irrelevant to the performance but also harmful to its effect. An outpour of raw feeling – not modeled on "the best conceived ideal type" – cannot guarantee an audience's recognition of that specific emotion. Paradoxically, the more the performance of an inner state is thought out and rehearsed and the more it relies on established representational forms, the more immediate it seems. From *The Paradox of Acting*, sincerity emerges as a highly controlled performance that has the appearance of spontaneity and immediacy.

[13] For an analysis of social conduct in terms of theatrical performance, see Erwin Goffman's study *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959). Goffman employs the terminology of acting and the stage, what he calls a 'dramaturgical analysis, to account for the mechanisms of social interaction. The 'self' for Goffman is not a fixed internal entity but rather a social process.

Semiotics of Sincerity: Transparency and Immediacy

As previously discussed, sincerity denotes the representation of an inner self on an outer surface for the benefit of an audience. Consequentially, sincerity exists only in communication. While any articulation of self and feeling has to be free from "falsification, adulteration, or alloy" (OED, "sincerity, n." n. pag.), and therefore, arguably, 'non-rhetorical' in order to be credibly sincere the communicational act itself makes non-rhetorical articulations of sincerity inconceivable. To circumvent this paradox, the rhetoric of sincerity (cf. van Alphen, Bal, and Smith, *Rhetoric*) employs representational forms that *appear* non-rhetorical (Taylor, "Why Do You" 22). Henri Peyre calls this seeming non-rhetoricity of sincerity – which is the basis of its semiotics – a "nudity of form" (313). This 'nudity' is a representational effect achieved through the strategic employment of particular representational forms that appear to reflect an inner state. In other words, the rhetorical strategy of sincerity involves the manipulation of a representational surface to give the impression of transparency. The resultant effect, as discussed, is that of seeming authenticity: the appearance of an absence not only of intentional manipulation of the representational form but also of rhetoricity itself. The success of the rhetorical strategy of sincerity depends on this effect. To achieve it, sincerity follows two rhetorical approaches: either a reduction of style to appear plain or a rawness or presentness of language to appear spontaneous and uncontrolled, or a combination of the two (cf. Peyre 312; Markovits 32; Sinanan and Milnes, "Introduction" 11). The effects of these manipulations of the representational surface are a seeming *transparency of form* and *immediacy of content*. What is more, they are subsequently read as the (moral) sincerity of the author, narrator, or narrative itself. As Diderot delineated for acting, the ostensible lack of artistic control in a

performance of sincerity is achieved through a skillful manipulation of the representational form (Peyre 313).[14]

Sincerity's 'nudity of form' is a central element in the passage from Stewart O'Nan's family novel *Wish You Were Here* quoted at the beginning of this chapter. The struggling photographer Ken has been given a Holga by his mentor, a simple camera model that is technically limited and meant to enable the protagonist to "feel the shot, not just see it" (57). Yet Ken remains doubtful of the camera's potential: "The Holga was just plastic, it wasn't real. It was supposed to teach him to rely on his eye or, better, as Morgan said, his gut. By its very simplicity it was supposed to make him see" (21). The characteristic constellation of sincerity – the seemingly transparent representation of feeling and interiority on an exterior surface ("feel the shot") – and its figural nudity – achieved through a reduction of style and/or a rawness of representation – emerge from this passage: It is the camera's "very simplicity" that is supposed to help the protagonist "see." The Holga's simplicity, however, does not equal an absence of artifice or mediation. Examining the images taken by a camera of the model in question, certain characteristic flaws emerge – such as the vignetting around the edges of the photographs due to light leaking into the camera body, or the limited focus of the image due to the plastic lens. Paradoxically, this exhibition of the photograph's materiality, and thus of its mediation, can have the opposite effect and heighten the seemingly unmediated access to the image (Lethen 206–207). Bill Brown points to this relativity of media perception in an article on "Materiality" (2010):

> One of the ironies of the digital regime (in the visual register) has been the extent to which photography and film are now reputed to have had intimate contact with the material world: at least photography had

[14] "But such an arduous ascent *per angusta* toward 'nudity of form' implies pruning, eliminating all ornaments and bombast, perhaps even desiccating all freshness of the emotion, being constantly on one's guard against excess of language, hence destroying spontaneousness in oneself in order to reach a more striking poverty or sparseness in the style. More skill is required for such a struggle toward sincerity, and even more expert artifice, than for naive writing" (Peyre 313, emphasis in original).

> an indexical relation to its subject; at least analogical media don't translate the world into numbers and quality into quantity. (53)

What becomes apparent is a relativity of sincerity by which a new and technically improved mode of representation – if it becomes the status quo – can endow an older and 'flawed' style with an appearance of transparency or immediacy, despite its apparent materiality. In the age of digital photography and photographic hyper-realism, the visibly material images of a point-and-shoot camera such as the Holga can come to appear more immediate, not despite but precisely because of their limited quality. Yet, they appear unmediated only in relation to the refined images produced by a more sophisticated camera. Their sincerity, undeniably, is a representational strategy. If we thus take photography in O'Nan's family novel to be a metatextual metaphor for literary writing, the subtext of the passage becomes one of literary representation and its relativity. Like the nostalgic images of the Holga, the referential realism of the contemporary family novel, in relation to the self-referential experiments of postmodern literature, becomes a representational convention that signifies transparent and immediate access to "something homely and real" (O'Nan, *Wish* 57).

In both speech and writing, sincerity is thus performed through rhetoric forms that signify transparency and/or immediacy to a specific audience. One such form that suggests transparency and immediate access to its content is literary realism. The apparent transparency of realism is based on the *familiarity* of its language. Likewise, William Dean Howells, in the lecture series held in 1899 which became "Novel-Writing and Novel-Reading," claims that the reader's "own knowledge of life" informs a novel's appearance of truth (9). In *The Rise of the Novel* (1967), Ian Watt expounds this thesis for the eighteenth-century British novel. According to Watt, the genesis of literary realism consisted essentially in a number of calculated choices of subject, plot, characters, setting, and language that shifted the focus from the extraordinary to the ordinary experience, from the aristocratic to the bourgeois experience and

therefore to the material setting and social conventions with which the eighteenth-century middle-class readership was 'at home' in both the literal and the metaphorical sense of the phrase. Watt further stresses the importance of the representation of "individual experience" (13) and emotions (174) for the emerging novel form and proposes that, during the eighteenth century, a "concrete particularity" (29) of description began to outweigh an aesthetic ideal – *vérité humaine* came to oppose *idéalité poétique*. Correspondingly, Christopher Prendergast, in his study on *The Order of Mimesis* (1988), maintains that the "primary function" of a mimetic text is to "reinstall" the reader "in a world that is familiar," so that he/she can be perceived as having agency and responsibility (76). In this definition, the recognition of a familial and therefore familiar setting by the reader – based on an identification with its subtext of bourgeois domestic materiality and morality – is at the root of literary realism. Family, understood as a dominant yet successfully naturalized social form of organization, appears as the origin of realist representation.

Just as sincerity's 'nudity of form' is based on a rhetorically achieved transparency rather than an absence lack of rhetoric, the familiarity of literary realism is based on an indirect rather than a direct relationship between text and reality: Literary realism is not 'real', it is recognized as such by way of an unspoken agreement on what reality looks like. This agreement ensures that the reality represented by a literary text may appear realistic to a reader, even if they have no direct experience of the depicted matter. Prendergast posits that the mimetic quality of a literary text is based on a "process of recognition whereby the reader connects the world produced by the text with the world of which he himself has direct or indirect knowledge" (61). This recognition is a matter of "mutual knowledge" (Giddens qtd. in Prendergast 31), which means that a shared referential language and culturally dominant scripts of character and action ensure the process of recognition in literary realism. What is recognized by a reader as 'real' is subject to a cultural "contract" (Prendergast 75). This contract is main-

tained through *tacit knowledge*. The concept of tacit knowledge, introduced by Michael Polanyi in *Personal Knowledge* (1958) and elaborated in *The Tacit Dimension* (1966), refers to knowledge that is habitually acquired and culturally shared without any necessary awareness of the acquired character of this knowledge. Although it is acquired through experience, tacit knowledge is trans-individual and shared culturally, both directly – through daily experience – and indirectly – through cultural representations. Nancy Armstrong claims that what has come to be understood as realism and what has come to be understood as 'the real' is determined by processes of circular reproduction: "Pointing to certain images as if they were chunks of the world itself," she argues, "fiction authorized only those images that met the expectations of its readership, expectations that fiction itself had delineated" (*Fiction* 28). This circular process of reproduction and authorization can also be applied to sincerity: Sincerity is an audience-oriented form of communication that draws on conventional forms of representation to ensure the outward legibility of an individual's 'innermost' self. In turn, by employing particular conventions of self-representation, performances of sincerity shape the audience's expectation as to what (the outward representation of) an 'innermost' self looks like. Paradoxically, the recognition (of a representation) of a 'unique' self as 'truthful' thus depends on the use of conventional and generic forms of representation. The semiotics of sincerity require a rhetorical surface that signifies transparency and/or immediacy in a similar manner to how the referential language of realism employs conventionalized images of 'the real'. What is more, by way of familiarity of language, realism can produce effects of transparency of form and accessibility of content that are essential to the semiotics of sincerity.

Having shown the communicational strategy of sincerity to employ rhetorical forms that signify transparency in order to evoke accessibility of 'true' self and meaning for the benefit of an audience, I will now turn to sincerity as an anthropological concept (Benthien and Martus, "Einleitung" 14). The following examination of the historical origins of sincerity in

early modern Europe in relation to profound socio-cultural developments at the time will reveal the social function of the rhetorical strategy in relation to states of crisis.

I.1.2 Social Functions of Sincerity

Early Modern Origins of Sincerity

The *Oxford English Dictionary* (in the following referred to as OED) states the earliest English usage of the word 'sincerity' to have meant "[f]reedom from falsification, adulteration, or alloy; purity, correctness" dating back to 1546 – the first usage in French (*sincérité*) is recorded in 1519. A slightly younger English usage is given for the year 1557 and understood to mean "[f]reedom from dissimulation or duplicity; honesty, straightforwardness" (OED, "sincerity, n."). Although the difference in meaning seems minor, two things are evident from this discrepancy: that sincerity is initially defined in terms of what it is not (namely "falsification" or "dissimulation") or by way of what threatens it (Rosenbaum 11), and that sincerity undergoes a transition in the 16th century from an empirical ("adulteration") to a moral ("duplicity") category. Initially, sincerity referred not to persons but to material objects. Deriving from the Latin *sincerus*, sincerity literally meant "clean, or sound, or pure" (Trilling 12) before it was applied metaphorically to a person's character. As a category of ethical discourse, sincerity came to be defined as "congruence between avowal and actual feeling" (Trilling 2), between an inner state and its outward representation.[15] Most studies therefore locate the origins of sincerity in the early modern period, where its emergence coincided with that of the individual.

[15] An empirical understanding of sincerity remains active in analytical approaches that foreground parallels between an artist's biography and his work (Peyre 11). The tension between moral (congruence between feeling and its representation) and empirical (parallels between author's biography and work) definitions still affects conceptions of literary sincerity, for example, in the application of rhetorical devices from autobiography or letter writing to fiction, as in Marilynne Robinson's family novel *Gilead*.

Greatly simplifying the critical debate surrounding the 'emergence of the individual', it is commonly held that, beginning in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the collision of Medieval theocentric and Renaissance anthropocentric ideas, combined with new economic and scientific developments and the gradual emergence of a middle class due to the end of feudalism and the beginning of mass-urbanization, resulted in the conception and fashioning of 'the individual' (cf. Martin; Lindholm; and Benthien and Martus, "Einleitung").[16] I will not discuss the historical, sociological, and psychological theories delineating either the 'discovery' or the 'invention' of the individual during the Renaissance. For my purpose, it will suffice to point out that the cultural practice of sincerity – meaning the rhetorical strategy by which an inner self is represented for others to witness – played a significant role in the formation of the modern individual as the "unique self within" (Martin 1330), thus establishing a historical and performative relationship between conceptions of subjectivity and sincerity as a practice. Historian John Martin identifies the preoccupation with sincerity – understood as the 'truthful' outward representation of an inner self – as a "characteristically modern concern" (1326).[17] He proposes that a shift in "moral vocabulary" – and thus a change in rhetoric – gradually brought about an understanding of the self as a unique and individual entity (1312) and comes to the conclusion that it is not interiority itself that is new during the Renaissance period[18] but rather the split between an 'inner' and 'outer' self. Significantly, this relationship of the interior to its outward expression is managed through the rhetorical practice of sincerity

[16] The shaping factors for the concept of the individual self, according to Martin, were Renaissance Humanism and Protestant Reformation (cultural factors), "both of which deeply problematized the relation of what contemporaries viewed as the internal self to one's words and actions" (1341), growing urbanism and court life (social factors), the demise of *concordia* (human harmony with / likeness to God), the secularization of prudence, and the "sudden emergence" of sincerity as emotional expression (1322–23).

[17] The immense popularity of *The Book of the Courtie*r (1528) by Baldassare Castiglione and of the rhetorical device of *sprezzatura* it promotes – a willful projection of effortlessness, a rehearsed spontaneity – speaks for a centrality of the concern with the representation of self among European elites of the period (Martin 1314, 1322).

[18] While sincerity is unquestionably a modern phenomenon, a pre-modern sense of human interiority can be found in St. Augustine's autobiographical work *Confessiones*, written between AD 397 and AD 398 (a prominent precursor for Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Confessions*, written between 1765 and 1770) or in the early Renaissance poet Petrarch's work.

(see Martin 1322–23).[19] This interdependence of sincerity and individual subjectivity is evident, for example, in the communicative practice of autobiographical writing, which requires both concepts and came into being at the same time as they did.[20]

The relationship of the 'inner self' to its outward expression is managed through performative practices of sincerity – which in turn generate what they appear to depict. However, sincerity further manages the relationship between individual subjects in settings of plurality and potential conflict by offering accountability based on an apparent transparency of intentions. The appearance of the modern individual was accompanied by, and dependent on, the inception of what has come to be understood as modern society (Trilling 20). Roughly summarizing, the sixteenth century witnessed a number of socially destabilizing developments, such as the gradual breakup of the feudal system and the unprecedented growth of urban centers. The ensuing and substantial demographic shift produced "mixed urban environments" (Lindholm 3) that resulted in a new permeability of the established social stratification (Bierwirth 66–67). New public spaces, such as the market and the theater, allowed for contact between large numbers of people who had been previously unlikely to cross paths in a limited agrarian/feudal setting. In turn, it led to an increasingly permeable social hierarchy and upward social mobility (see Benthien and Martus, "Einleitung" 14–15). Another element contributing to the growing plurality of sixteenth-century European society was the circumstance that European colonialism – and with it the exchange of foreign goods, customs, and, not least, people – was increasingly affecting daily life. In short, unprecedented intercultural contact caused yet another confrontation with alterity and subsequently cultural tensions and in-

[19] The sister concept to sincerity in Martin's view is prudence. Prudence, from Latin *prudentia*, wisdom, is increasingly understood during the Renaissance period to be the more strongly tactical revealing of 'self', the necessity to dissimulate in social situations for protection of the 'self' (see Benthien and Martus, "Einleitung" 7; Martin 1325). Martin fathoms "the prudential self" as "a rhetorical posture that subordinated honesty to decorum" and the "ideal of sincerity" as "subordinat[ing] decorum to honesty" (1333).

[20] Trilling also refers to the emergence of the individual in relation to the concept of sincerity: "The impulse to write autobiography may be taken as virtually definitive of the psychological changes to which the historians point. Which is to say [...] that the new kind of personality which emerges [...] is what we call an individual: at a certain point in history men became individuals" (24).

securities (see van Alphen and Bal, "Introduction" 2–3). The need for a communicational model which might control and stabilize relationships in an increasingly pluralistic society arose: The widespread emergence of sincerity in early modern Europe suggests its key role in the negotiation of these fundamental sociocultural changes (see Benthien and Martus, "Einleitung" 14).

Sincerity, however, is not only a counter reaction to social destabilization but also as a conforming response to authoritative pressure. The various religious conflicts of the period – between Catholicism and Protestantism, between different Protestant denominations, and particularly between Christians and former Jews and Muslims who converted to Christianity – have played an important role in shaping a sense of interiority and for the invention of practices to veil and unveil what has come to be understood as the 'innermost self' (cf. Taylor, Bierwirth).[21] In the case of the Jewish-Christian conversion as well as in the heresy trials accompanying the rise of Protestantism,[22] the question of how one's faith can be performed publicly acquired existential significance. Renaissance society was in need of a practice that would make the inner self visible – to peers but also to social authority – and this need was met by sincerity. Sincerity in sixteenth-century European society was thus not a matter of moral choice, but rather – as John Martin phrases it – a "moral imperative" (1326). Emerging in sixteenth-century Europe – and arguably reaching its prime in the eighteenth century and the 'Age of Sensibility' – sincerity operates on the threshold between the increasingly distinct

[21] Jane Taylor notes that "the first written record of the word *sincere* in English" can be found in the correspondence between the English martyr John Frith and the prominent opponent of the Reformation Thomas More (Taylor, "Why Do You" 23, emphasis in original). This record predates the one given by the OED. Sincerity in this exchange is applied to the character of John Wycliffe, who is known as an early dissident in the Roman Catholic Church during the fourteenth century. One significant aspect of this reference for a discussion of sincerity as a rhetoric device is, as Taylor points out, "that 'sincere' as used does not refer to the condition of Wycliffe's inner being. Rather it describes Wycliffe as evidenced through a life witnessed by others" (23). This further shows sincerity to be a category of the public realm rather than of inwardness.

[22] Taylor sees the heresy trial as instrumental to the origin of the rhetorical practice of sincerity: "The instrument of investigative terror, the heresy trial – with its specific nexus of power, anxiety, and authenticity – made a conception of sincerity necessary. [...] Given this history, we may propose that sincerity essentially arises in order to resolve the problem of the forced confession ("Why Do You" 25).

private and a public realm[23] and thereby allows for the public representation and management of private feelings and beliefs, particularly in situations of both social instability and pressure.

Sincerity as Reaction to Crisis

As sincerity arises, historically speaking, during periods of heightened social plurality and pressure, the pervasive contemporary concern with sincerity (cf. Magill, *Sincerity;* Fitzgerald, *Mother's Morals*) can be attributed to a current climate of social as well as (inter)cultural conflict. Indeed, recent studies have pointed out that a cultural preoccupation with sincerity arises in historical periods of crisis (cf. Lindholm; Markovits; Rosenbaum; van Alphen and Bal, "Introduction"; and Taylor, "Why Do You"). Present-day North America can be easily diagnosed as a crisis-ridden culture with profound social and epistemological insecurities. The disputed 2000 presidential election and, soon after, the events of 11 September, 2011 and their aftermath, the so-called War on Terror, have brought on or at least catalyzed a political as well as cultural crisis. The global financial crisis of 2007/08 as well as the election of Barack Obama as the first African-American President in the same year furthered the polarization of political camps, resulting in political movements such as the conservative Tea Party. Accordingly, political scientist Elizabeth Markovits identifies the United States after the events of 9/11/2001 to be under a "particular stress" (41). This kind of stress promotes professions of sincerity.

The crises managed by sincerity, however, are not exclusively those of innercultural and intercultural conflict but also those of representation. New media can radically alter established modes of communication and thereby disrupt signification – a process recently attributed to new digital media and virtual social interaction. The resulting instability of representa-

[23] Cf. Habermas, *Structural Transformation* on the development of a public sphere. Habermas dates the concept of the public sphere to the eighteenth century and it is at the same time that sincerity as a communicational strategy reaches its prime as both an instrument for social interaction and literary genre.

tion threatens the consensual notion of 'the real'. This loss of a stable sense of reality gives rise to a desire for substantiality. In an article on this particular longing, Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht traces the contemporary 'return of the real'[24] and the desire for substantial reality to the virtual, hyper-mediated quality of the quotidian. Bill Brown supports this claim: "It could well be argued," Brown writes, "that the digital's apparent threat to materiality helped provoke a new materialist turn that began to thrive in the 1990s within a variety of disciplines: anthropology, art history, history, cinema studies, the history of science, and literary and cultural studies" ("Materiality" 50). Both Gumbrecht and Brown insist that this turn to substantiality and materiality, this return of 'the real', is a genuinely modern phenomenon – predating postmodernism by centuries – that reappears in historical periods when new media unsettle the established order of representation and induce a "hunger for the really real"[25] (Lindholm 53).[26] Similar to the new media and expanding literary markets of the Renaissance (rise of print-media and the theater) and the Romantic period (explosion of periodical literature and the novel) (cf. Sinanan and Milnes, "Introduction"), the 'digital revolution' of the turn of the millennium fostered a preoccupation with sincerity.[27]

From what has been established above, sincerity emerges as a rhetorical technique for the promotion of community in social contexts determined by difference (cf. Benthien and Martus, "Einleitung"). The practice of sincerity maintains personal relationships by allowing for individual articulations of identity in direct, face-to-face communicational situations. However, sincerity also functions as a stabilizing practice on a larger social scale: In urban and increasingly globalized societies, communal identity is produced discursively and does

[24] 'The return of the real', a phrase for contemporary tendencies in arts and philosophy, artistic representation, and cultural climate, was coined in a work of the same title by Hal Foster.
[25] For a recent articulation of this 'reality hunger' induced by changes in representation, see Shields.
[26] Markovits emphasizes the historical and cyclical dimension of sincerity when she draws a parallel to political rhetoric in "Athens during the Peloponnesian War" (41).
[27] The rise of print as well as digital media complicate the semiotic notion of 'original' and 'copy', producing a market for, and raising the value of, what could now be conceived of as 'authentic' documents (Sinanan and Milnes, "Introduction" 22).

not require personal contact between the individual members of the community (cf. Benedict Anderson). Accordingly, conflicts of differing value and belief systems within a community as well as between cultures are predominantly negotiated semiotically through public discourse. Sincerity thereby functions as an effective rhetorical instrument both to reassure members of the same community of their shared identity during periods of intercultural conflict and to produce cooperative relations between groups from conflicting cultural contexts. Effectively, articulations of sincerity suggest consistency between communicants in situations of difference. By relying on familiar and therefore recognizable modes of representation, sincerity suggests a transparency of the sender's intentions and thus yields the receiver's trust.

The OED defines trust as the "[c]onfidence in or reliance on some quality or attribute of a person or thing, or the truth of a statement," significantly "without evidence or investigation" (OED, "trust, n." n. pag). The creation of trust is therefore indispensable for social cohesion and solidarity, especially in complex societies, where communal relationships are often managed indirectly and without the 'evidence' of personal contact. Trust is produced through rhetorical forms recognized by the receiver as familiar. Niklas Luhmann has examined the social function of trust and its relationship to familiarity: "[T]rust has to be achieved within a familiar world, and changes may occur in the familiar features of the world which will have an impact on the possibility of developing trust in human relations" (95). The social, cultural, and representational instabilities that can bring about crises in complex societies are rooted in those changes in the "familiar features of the world" (such as those discussed above, i.e., the Reformation, the creation of mixed urban spaces, unprecedented intercultural contact, new media, globalization, etc.) and in the subsequent loss of trust in its institutions. Articulations of sincerity counteract this loss by evoking a familiarity of the representational surface, thereby promoting the receiver's trust in what is represented and, by extension, in the sender. Luhmann speculates that, by contributing to the solidarity of a society, it is the trust in micro-

level relationships that enables macro-level systems to operate (104). From this perspective, sincerity functions as a rhetorical strategy for the production of trust in both direct (interpersonal) and indirect social relationships (maintained through public discourse). Naturalized as a moral value, it is a specifically modern and middle-class "anthropological concept" (Benthien and Martus, "Einleitung" 14) that produces trust in reaction to socio-cultural as well as representational instability.[28]

Politics of Sincerity

The social purpose of sincerity, as discussed above, is the creation of trust and the enablement of social relationships, often in reaction to crisis. One example of this is the so-called Puritan plain style or plain speech. Plain style facilitated the interpretation of Protestantism as the return to a more pure religious experience in opposition to the ornate rituals of the Roman Catholic Church (Bierwirth 63). Employing everyday language and simple sentence structures, plain style was thought to reveal God's truth. Largely devoid of ornament, figural language, allusions to classical texts, and Latin quotations, Puritan writing and preaching in particular appeared simple and direct to its audience (cf. Grabo, Ziff). By seemingly eliminating rhetorical barriers, the employment of plain style allowed for a communion with God but, significantly, also enabled a deep connection with fellow Puritans. Jesper Rosenmeier therefore argues that this new mode of communication was seen to foster 'true' relationships that would renew society and was consequently inseparable from the ideal of Christian friendship as well as from the model society City upon a Hill (581). From this – as well as from the other historical examples cited above, such as heresy trials and unprecedented social contact in urban centers – sincerity emerges as a rhetorical practice that is never politically neutral, but

[28] An insightful interpretation of articulations of sincerity as reacting to both socio-economic stress and representational changes can be found in an article entitled "Austen, Sincerity, and the Standard." The author reads the anxieties over trust and sincerity in Jane Austen's novels as a reaction to both the financial instability of the writer's period and the 'fictitious' medium of the bank note (Dick).

rather employed for a particular social purpose.[29] This intentionality further differentiates sincerity from authenticity, which is by definition without intent or motivation, but it also raises questions of sincerity's political evaluation, which I will discuss in the following.

Generally, sincerity is seen as either a practice of exclusion or inclusion of persons wishing to participate in social communication. At the base of the dispute over sincerity's socio-political evaluation is the figural nudity that determines its semiotics: Sincerity employs rhetorical forms that suggest non-rhetoricity and thereby appears transparent and without motive. Nevertheless, sincerity is intentional, communicational, and audience-specific, in the sense that it actively strives to form a connection with a specific audience and to transport a particular meaning. The seeming transparency of sincerity is therefore often considered deceptive and manipulative. What is more, the veiling of a public statement's rhetorical character is sometimes seen as anti-democratic: Elizabeth Markovits argues that, by substituting truthfulness (proclaiming what one believes to be true) with truth claims (proclaiming to state the absolute truth) (30–32), sincerity's nudity of form forecloses any discussion of its validity (30-32). Hyper-sincerity, according to Markovits, is therefore more deceptive than any style of speech that is openly rhetorical.[30] By veiling its subjectivity and its motivation, sincerity reduces the multiplicity of interpretations and closes the "discursive space required for democracy" (42–43). And to be sure, sincerity not only establishes communication but also confines it to a particular audience. As discussed above, sincerity – in order to be tacitly recog-

[29] In European history, the political motivation of sincerity is further evident, for instance, in the development of German sincerity in the seventeenth century as a nationalistic reaction against the French court or the attempts to maintain a purity of language through institutions such as the Académie Française: Gendered implications are evident from the rejection of specifically 'female' conduct as artificial (Benthien and Martus, "Einleitung" 7f.).

[30] Markovits examines the threat of what she calls "hyper sincerity": "These zero-degree tropes take the tendencies I have discussed to their most extreme. They make truth claims through a unitary and simple self, able to objectively see the world for what it is; they prove their sincerity through their expressed oppositions to rhetoric and artifice and their use of plainly styled speech" (41). And: "The realist rhetorical style identified by Robert Hariman takes this hyper-sincerity one step further. Like the cult of plain speech, it proposes to rid the world of the artifice of rhetoric, making a metadiscursive statement that authenticates the speaker and undermines potential critics. But the realist style also makes certain assumptions about the social world as a place dominated by self-interested actors, natural laws, and necessary choices imposed by the situation. […] It aligns itself with the 'real, natural' world by claiming objectivity and transparency" (42–43).

nized as the transparent representation of interiority – relies on rhetorical conventions that will appear as 'nudity of form' to a specific receiver. This audience accommodation relies on so-called speech norms, which veil or negate difference (i.e., of gender, class, age, religion, etc.) (cf. Markovits). Speech norms exclude voices that do not comply with their rule; however, they also facilitate recognition, a prerequisite to the successful performance of sincerity. The threat of sincerity, understood as non-rhetorical representation, thus consists in the naturalization of a discursive world as an objective reality. The threat of sincerity, understood as a communicational form that is audience-specific, consists in the exclusion of other potential audiences. What is more, sincerity, since its inception in early modern Europe, has been subject to social authority, demanding that the self be revealed, as is evident, for example, from its roots in courtly conduct[31] and heresy trials (cf. Taylor, "Why Do You"). Incidentally, these merited allegations against sincerity are also frequently brought against (the white, middle-class) family novel as a 'sincere' literary form, which I will return to in my introduction on family fiction.

Despite these contentions, sincerity remains an effective rhetorical form to create connection, trust, and inclusion. As discussed above, sincerity can establish a plane for communication among members of pluralistic societies determined by difference and is a rhetorical prerequisite for trust-building and accountability. This view of sincerity is based on an understanding of the concept as performative and intersubjective as well as its disengagement from the notion of 'true' or authentic subjectivity. In this way, sincerity takes on significance for

[31] In the political treatise *Il Principe* (written around 1513, published posthumously 1532), Niccolò di Bernardo dei Machiavelli offers his master Lorenzo di Medici instructions on how to appear sincere through his own example: "I have not ornamented this book with rhetorical turns of phrase, or stuffed it with pretentious and magnificent words, or made use of allurements and embellishments that are irrelevant to my purpose, as many authors do. For my intention has been that my book should be without pretensions, and should rely entirely on the variety of the examples and the importance of the subject to win approval" (5–6). By having relinquished – against the conventions of his time – ornament and flattery when addressing a statesman, Machiavelli self-referentially employs a 'nudity of form' to evoke his own sincerity in advising the prince. Just as Baldassare Castiglione in *The Courtier* advises aspiring courtiers to practice *sprezzatura* – a willful projection of effortlessness, a rehearsed spontaneity – in order to flourish at court, Machiavelli suggests that the prince should practice rhetorical transparency to achieve his political objectives.

the social system beyond individual relationships. In *The Fall of Public Man* (1974), Richard Sennett builds an argument for sincerity as a social practice to navigate the public sphere. The eighteenth century saw the emergence of a modern public, a region of social life other than family and friends, where "diverse, complex social groups were to be brought into ineluctable contact" (Sennett 17). The public sphere designates the new public spaces arising in urban centers, such as the market, the coffee house, the theater, etc., but also the discursive spaces of the rising print publication. According to Jürgen Habermas, the public sphere is therefore "a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed" ("Public Sphere" 1572). Significantly, the first principle of the public sphere is that of its accessibility to all citizens (cf. Habermas, "Public Sphere"). Consequently, sincerity – evoking intelligibility and accessibility – becomes the communicative principle of the public sphere.[32] The performance of a public self thereby becomes the interface allowing for social interaction. The metaphor Sennett employs for sincerity as a communicational interface is that of the shared mask (222). In his conception, the mask neither hides nor reveals a 'true' or authentic self, but rather ensures the intelligibility of the presented self by relying on conventional – i.e., shared and repetitive – forms of representation.[33] In this manner, the self is separated from the performance of the self for the benefit of communicating with an 'other', and sincerity can become an instrument to promote tolerant relationships and institutions within a

[32] See also Amanda Anderson's reading of Habermasian proceduralism as a reframing of sincerity. In *The Way We Argue Now: A Study in the Cultures of Theory* (2006), Anderson depicts sincerity as a transpersonal communicative presupposition necessary for any social practice: "In Trilling's study, sincerity functions as an understanding of selfhood that is linked to a cluster of moral, social, and political values. Authenticity then intervenes to contest sincerity's ability to capture the truth of human existence: in doing so it displaces the normative understanding of stable selfhood and transparent self-presentation that sincerity seems to presuppose. But what gets most consequentially left aside in this challenge are the transpersonal dimensions of the sincerity paradigm, those forms of transparency and moral integrity that undergrid critique and interarticulate with larger social and political practices and institutions. At this level, it becomes harder to simply reduce the sincerity paradigm to a mistake founded upon an illusory and outmoded form of agency or identity, since sincerity here operates more as a form of critical integrity rather than an absolute achievement of selfhood" (167). Opposing Lionel Trilling's notion that 'true' freedom can be achieved through a dedication to personal authenticity, Anderson proposes a Habermasian depersonalized sincerity to maintain what she calls a "critical integrity" in social discourse and practice (168–169).

[33] Sinanan and Milnes, for instance, read eighteenth-century autobiography as "rehears[ing] formal tropes, assuring sincerity through repetition" ("Introduction" 14).

pluralistic society (cf. Patterson). This then allows for an understanding of sincerity as a practice of social inclusion.

Although Sennett does not employ this exact terminology, the concepts of sincerity and authenticity are evident from his juxtaposition of the "sociable community of the eighteenth century" (222) and subsequent "tyrannies of intimacy" (337). Sennett thereby delineates a turn from the social principle of *public life* before 1800 to the modern order of *private life*. According to the sociologist's model, fundamental changes of the capitalist economy and of the religious belief system brought about profound social anxieties, culminating in a shift of the principles of social expression that devalued the public sphere as social forum and began to privilege the private realm. This turn described by Sennett can be historically and conceptually aligned with Lionel Trilling's model of the replacement of sincerity by authenticity as affective ideal during the Romantic period. Sennett conceptualizes this turn in social expression as one between the principles of self-representation (authenticity) and self-presentation (sincerity) and between "finding out what one feels" and "making the feeling clear and manifest to others" (314), respectively. Like authenticity, the representation of feeling is concerned with specificity and uniqueness, whereas the presentation of feeling makes use of conventionalized forms and is repeatable, like sincerity. Authenticity and the representation of feeling are expressive modes based on subjective meanings that cannot be conveyed due to their idiosyncrasy: "[W]ithout any filtering or shaping or falsifying of my experience to fit it to a standard […] the 'pity' in my life can hardly be expressive in the same way to you as your own sense of pity, derived from different experience" (Sennett 108). Sennett therefore claims that the representation of feeling privileges what he calls intimate expression to the point of social incommunicability, making it "asocial" (108). The presentation of feeling, in turn, is comparable to sincerity as a mode of expression that is decidedly social. Both are articulations of interiority concerned with making feeling intelligible through audience accommodation:

> Suppose one person tells another about his father's dying days in the hospital. […] The man recounting these moments could not merely relive them, but had to *mold* them, *selecting* some details to *emphasize*, *suppressing* others, even falsifying his report, in order to fit into a form or *fit a pattern which his listener understood* to be what dying was about. (Sennett 107, emphasis added)

Employing established patterns of representation, Sennett's social masks thus allow communicants to share meaning, to build trust, and to form social connections. Such a conception of sincerity, namely as a performance and social practice that builds trust and is productive rather than expressive of subjectivity, allows for a critical discussion of sincerity within contemporary cultural production, which moves beyond the establishment of a text's (or even author's) moral sincerity and beyond an identification of sincerity with regressive or conservative politics.

New Sincerity: "Moral Life in Revision"

In *Sincerity and Authenticity*, Lionel Trilling suggests that

> [n]ow and then it is possible to observe the moral life in process of revising itself, perhaps by reducing the emphasis it formerly placed upon one or another of its elements, perhaps by inventing and adding to itself a new element, some mode of conduct or of feeling which hitherto it had not regarded as essential to virtue. The news of such an event is often received with a degree of irony or some other sign of resistance. (1)

The present study suggests that at the beginning of the twenty-first century – after the end of the Cold War and at the beginning of the War on Terror – the Western world and particularly the United States of America are undergoing yet another "process of revising", and that this new "emphasis" is manifest in contemporary literature, and particularly family fiction, in the form of a 'new' sincerity. In 2001, two weeks after the attacks on the World Trade Center, journalist and author Roger Rosenblatt gave voice to this sense of moral revision:

> One good thing could come from this horror: it could spell the *end of the age of irony*. For some 30 years – roughly as long as the Twin Towers were upright – the good folks in charge of America's intellectual life have insisted that nothing was to be believed in or taken seriously. Nothing was real. [...] No

> more. The planes that plowed into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon were real. The flames, smoke, sirens – real. The chalky landscape, the silence of the streets – all real. (n. pag., emphasis added)

To prognose no less than a cultural turn – "the end of the age of irony" – might have been exaggerated, but during the last decade of the twentieth and the first decade of the twenty-first century, similar proclamations were made, bespeaking a desire to move beyond irony as the dominant tone of postmodern artistic expression. The resulting schools and movements – some of them predating 9/11 – distinguish themselves from postmodernism via their prefixes: new sincerity (Kelly), new enlightenment ("The New Enlightenment: Commentary"), new realism (Versluys, *Neo-Realism*), new sentimentalism (Epstein), post-postmodernism (Hickman; Timmer), post-irony (postirony.com; Konstantinou), and beyond postmodernism (Stierstorfer). Their appearance signals what is often referred to as the end of postmodernism (Eshelman). This "process of revising" (Trilling 1) can also be seen to manifest itself in an inflation of cultural articulations of sincerity and a heightened anxiety over insincerity. This can be exemplified by the contemporary "obsession with straight talkers" in political discourse (Markovits 1), evident, for example, from the Straight Talk Express campaign bus of Republican presidential candidate Senator John McCain in 2000 and 2008, who claimed to shed the rhetorical refinement of political discourse in favor of 'telling it like it is'. An example from the literary field that illustrates the anxiety over insincerity in the arts is the scandal surrounding the 'fake' autobiographies published by James Frey, J.T. LeRoy / Laura Albert, and Margaret B. Jones / Margaret Seltzer. In recent years, these three authors have published highly praised 'memoirs' detailing personal tragedies (in the latter two cases under pseudonyms). After their exposure, they were held publicly and/or legally responsible for the supposed fraud they committed.[34] While political and literary discourse are not perceived as making equivalent truth claims, and neither are autobiographical non-fiction and prose fiction,

[34] See Kakutani for the debate on James Frey's 'enhanced' memoir *A Million Little Pieces* (2003); Rich on the Native-American gang member Margaret B. Jones' memoir *Love and Consequences* (2008) written by Margaret Seltzer; and Beachy, St. John, and the writer's website http://www.jtleroy.com/ for information on JT LeRoy / Laura Albert's work.

these examples nonetheless serve to illustrate the pervading concern with a sincerity of public expression in the United States of America and the association of sincerity with conservative values and insincerity with progressive politics and the liberal arts.

The demand to speak the truth plainly – and thus sincerely – has a long cultural tradition in the United States. From the Puritans' moral and aesthetic ideal of plain speech to Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* (1776) and former television host Bill O'Reilly's *The No Spin Zone*:[35] The notion that public discourse should be stripped of rhetorical 'spin' and presented 'straight' is deeply embedded in North American social, political, and cultural discourse. These paragons of plain style are perfect examples of the rhetorical strategy of sincerity, meaning that they are in no way 'stripped', 'plain' or 'straight' but rather made to appear so. Thomas Paine, for example, composed his pamphlet promoting North American independence from British colonial rule like a sermon, relinquishing Latin references and Enlightenment philosophy in favor of Biblical imagery to convince common readers (rather than educated elites) of his cause. Paine's pamphlet became an immediate bestseller and has been credited with instigating the American Revolution (Gordon Wood 55–56). *Common Sense* thus appears sincere to a particular audience, but it is certainly not without accommodation and therefore not without spin. A strategic rhetorical representation, however, does not equal dishonesty. Stanley Fish – in an opinion piece for the *New York Times* entitled "The All-Spin Zone" (2007) – argues that spin is indeed indispensable to any intellectual argument:

> [T]he pronouncing on things from an interested angle […] is not a regrettable and avoidable form of suspect thinking and judging; it is the very content of thinking and judging. No spin means no thought, no politics, no debating of what is true and what is false. The dream of improving mankind through a program of linguistic reform – a dream that dies hard and probably never will die – looks forward to a world in which everything is always and already 'unspun.' There is such a world; it is sometimes called heaven and it is sometimes called death. It is never called human. (Fish n. pag.)

[35] O'Reilly's publication, named after a segment on his cable news talk show *The O'Reilly Factor*, is based on the premise that the author / show host holds the politicians and persons of public interest that he interviews to honest answers and plain speech.

What Fish poignantly addresses here is the common contempt for rhetoric as dissimulation – found already at the heart of Plato's critic of the poets in *The Republic*. Yet rhetoric is unavoidable in communication, verbal or otherwise. As Wayne C. Booth maintains in *The Rhetoric of Rhetoric: The Quest for Effective Communication* (2004), rhetorical devices are "employed at every moment when one human being intends to produce, through the use of signs or symbols, some effect on another – by words, or facial expressions, or gestures, or any symbolic skill of any kind" (Booth, *The Rhetoric of Rhetoric* xi). Evident from Fish's emphatic defense of spin, rhetoric is not only indispensable to persuasion but also essential to judgment and distinction. Spin is therefore neither absent from nor irreconcilable with new sincerity.

Sincerity's characteristic spin is that it appears to be free of spin and that it has come to be naturalized as seemingly non-rhetorical. A discussed above, this ostensible non-rhetoricity is also the aspect of sincerity that attracts significant moral criticism to the concept. Elizabeth Markovits diagnoses contemporary North American society with "collective anxiety" (1) about spin – evident from the popular concern with 'spin doctors' and the phenomenon of 'bullfighting' (cf. Fugere, Hardaway, and Warshawsky) – that leads to a 'cult' of plain speech (cf. Haiman). Yet, besides the prevailing moral critique of sincerity's veiled rhetoricity, attempts have recently been made to re-establish sincerity as a model of 'civil' communication. In an article with the bespeaking title "The Overrated Inner Self", sociologist Orlando Patterson, for instance, proposes to align contemporary conceptions of the self as intersubjective with sincerity – the representation of feelings geared to the needs of a particular audience – as a "performance" of "civility and tolerance" (n. pag.). Another reevaluation of sincerity comes from the field of literary discourse. In his article "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction" (1993), the late author David Foster Wallace claims that the broad appropriation of iro-

ny by television programming[36] – formerly a counterculture attribute of early postmodern literature – makes it impossible for contemporary fiction to employ ironic modes without being complicit with the establishment of television. Wallace therefore posits that

> [t]he next real literary 'rebels' in this country might well emerge as some weird bunch of 'anti-rebels', born oglers who dare to back away from ironic watching, who have the childish gall actually to endorse single entendre values. Who treat old untrendy human troubles and emotions in U.S. life with reverence and conviction. Who eschew self-consciousness and fatigue. These anti-rebels would be outdated, of course, before they even started. *Too sincere. Clearly repressed*. Backward, quaint, naïve, anachronistic. […] The new rebels might be the ones willing to risk the yawn, the rolled eyes, the cool smile, the nudged ribs, the parody of gifted ironists, the 'How banal.' Accusations of sentimentality, melodrama. Credulity. (193, emphasis added)

Observing – in Lionel Trilling's words – contemporary "moral life in process of revising itself" (1), Wallace anticipates not so much a rebellion as an 'anti-rebellion' of sincerity to end the corrupted (because appropriated by consumer culture) dominance of irony in contemporary literature.[37]

This rise of sincerity in cultural discourse can be mapped onto a cyclical model. Accordingly, the respective dominance of the concept of either sincerity or authenticity has been subject to repeated turns (cf. Ball). One turn, it appears, fosters the desire for the other (cf. Jakobson). At times, these cycles align with other representational cycles, such as those of (anti-)mimesis and (self-)referentiality (cf. Ickstadt). The latest turn to sincerity in cultural production has been distinguished from previous iterations through the attachment of the prefix 'new' as early as the 1980s (cf. Collins, Kelly, Shank). It is propelled by a cultural climate that is "more concerned with re-establishing connections between individuals and society than in advocat-

[36] Irony, rather than insincerity, has to be understood as an antonym for sincerity. This is evident from Wallace's essay but also from the treatment of 'irony' as a concept opposed to 'trust' and 'commitment' – values produced and maintained through practices of sincerity.

[37] Wallace renounces irony for different reasons than Rosenblatt in his much-quoted contribution to *Time* magazine entitled "The Age of Irony Comes to an End". Rosenblatt understands what he proclaims to be the "end of the age of irony" in the wake of 9/11 as the "[o]ne good thing [that] could come from this horror" (n. pag.). He understands irony as a legacy and symbol of the 1960s' counterculture and so does Wallace. Wallace, however, criticizes irony not for its countercultural qualities but for its appropriation by consumer culture.

ing individual protest and autonomy" (Haselstein, Gross, and Snyder-Körber 16).[38] 'New' therefore marks a turn away from postmodern destabilization to a post-postmodern strive for stabilization and reconstruction, but it also distinguishes the contemporary sincerity of cultural discourse from that of sentimentalism. 'New' includes an exhibition of self-awareness of the impossibility of 'true' meaning and 'truthful' communication as well as accompanying elements of self-irony that do not diminish sincerity's effect, particularly in popular culture (cf. McGill). This recent cycle can further be seen to align with the renaissance of the family novel and the return of literary realism. The following sections will therefore examine the productive relationship between the rhetoric of sincerity and the literary genre of the family novel.

I.1.3 Intelligible Forms: Sincerity and Genre

In the passage quoted at the beginning of the chapter, the protagonist of Stewart O'Nan's family novel *Wish You Were Here* is trying to create art that is sincere, that is, in short, "homely and real" (57). Conceptualizing a potential project, he envisions "a whole book of fishing shots, the total subculture – men and their sons, their boats and gear – done in that flat style like Bill Owens' Suburbia" (57). Two things are apparent from this conception of a sincere artwork: the plain style ("that flat style") and the family genre ("men and their sons"). And to be sure, literary sincerity is a question of genre as well as of the manipulation of the rhetorical form. In fact, a genre in itself can already signify a nudity of form. Some genres are conventionally understood to be more suitable to a performance of sincerity than others. Poetry, for example, is often referred to as a genre suited to the more immediate articulation of feeling (Rosenbaum 4). Another genre that immediately suggests sincerity is autobiography, which emerged simultaneously with the concepts of individuality and sincerity in the early modern

[38] Interestingly, Amanda Anderson aligns poststructuralism with authenticity due to its rejection of metaphysics, normativity, conventionality, and its appeals to valorized forms of practice and identity (even if they are unstable, hybrid, parodist, performative) (130).

period (Martin 1340; Bierwirth 58). Trilling therefore discusses autobiography as interwoven with the construction of self and society:

> The subject of an autobiography is just such a self, bent on revealing himself in all his truth, bent, that is to say, on demonstrating his sincerity. His conception of his private and uniquely interesting individuality, together with his impulse to reveal his self, to demonstrate that in it which is to be admired and trusted, are, we may believe, his response to the newly available sense of an audience, of that public which society created. (25)

This apparent urge to demonstrate sincerity is particularly true for the autobiographical form of the (literary) diary. The diary excels at its performance of sincerity because it often appears to presume no audience and therefore veils its audience accommodation, and thus intentionality, particularly well. The associated epistolary (novel) likewise creates an appearance of privacy, honesty, and a 'baring of the soul' and is therefore located in the semantic field of sincerity. Ian Watt argued that it is the epistolary novel that comes closest to achieving an effect of individual consciousness and subjectivity because "the epistolary method impels the writer toward producing something that may pass for the spontaneous transcription of the subjective reactions of the protagonists to the events as they occur" (192–193). As discussed above, an appearance of spontaneity in literary writing may evoke a heightened immediacy through its seeming lack of rhetorical control. The epistolary – as well as autobiography – will be further discussed in the context of Marilynne Robinson's epistolary family novel *Gilead*.

The autobiography, the diary, and the epistolary lend themselves to articulations of literary sincerity because they carry the promise of emotional disclosure. Their sincerity, however, is not inherent to the genre, but rather maintained through particular rhetorical devices – such as the first-person perspective – and a *familiarity* of form. This familiarity of genre is assured through the repetition of its formal tropes (Sinanan and Milnes, "Introduction" 14). As discussed above in the context of the sincerity of literary realism, the familiarity of the literary form can lead to a perceived transparency of representation. In the same manner that articula-

tions of sincerity in social situations rely on formulaic repetition for their recognition as such, literary sincerity relies on literary conventionality for its effect. Due to the immense success of the genre of the realist novel in the past two centuries, its particular formal characteristics have receded into the background, allowing for an equation of the novel with fiction or narrative in general (McKeon xiii). The literary form of the realist novel has come to be tacitly recognized as a transparent 'container' of fiction. This does not automatically render any example of the genre sincere, but it fulfills the semiotic prerequisite for a nudity of form. As subgenre that makes occasional use of the form of a diary or letter[39] and often incorporates autobiographical elements, the family novel lends itself even better to articulations of sincerity because of the familiarity of the family as the dominant principle of social organization. The determining relationships between mother, father, and child, as well as their accompanying conflicts, are tacitly recognized by the reader, whether from experience or through the reception of cultural representations of family. Further, some of the characteristic elements of the family novel are also typical tropes of sincerity, such as the family home as setting.[40] Whether the family home is idyllic, corrupted, lost, or regained – the representation of its literal and figural interiority designates sincerity. Another element common to articulations of sincerity as well as to the family novel is the child figure, sometimes employed as narrator,[41] which is conventionally read as an allegory for innocence.[42] As the present study examines the relationship of contemporary family fiction to new sincerity, I will first address the specificities of the subgenre family novel, before turning to an analysis of two family novels by the contemporary authors Marilynne Robinson and Jonathan Franzen.

[39] Drawing on Richardson's novel *Pamela* (1741), which consists of letters from a daughter to her parents, Mark Anderson claims that the epistolary form in literature is in its origin a family form (25–26).
[40] Benthien and Martus claim that sincerity is topographically specific, meaning that certain (socially constructed) spaces are more suitable to performances of sincerity than others are. They name the pastoral space as a literary space conceived as sincere ("Einleitung" 3).
[41] For instance in Michael Kimball's *The Way the Family Got Away* (2001), Jeannette Wall's *The Glass Castle* (2005), and Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005).
[42] Benthien and Martus count the child, the monk, and 'the savage' among the allegories of sincerity that are commonly employed in literature ("Einleitung" 4).

I.2 Family: Production Place of Feeling

"[T]the family romance instructs the public as to how it should understand the relations of the private."

Dana Alice Heller, *Family Plots: The De-Oedipalization of Popular Culture* (1995)

"Family is a narrative of love and comfort which corresponds to nothing in the world but which has formed behavior and expectation."

Marilynne Robinson, "Family" (2005)

I.2.1 Social and Literary History of Family

The Family: A Shifting Form of Social Organization

The family – commonly understood in contemporary Western societies as an affective unit consisting of parents and children – is by no means a natural form of community, but rather a conventionalized form of social organization. Nonetheless, "Westerners do erroneously associate the family with nature and project it backward into a timeless past" (Stacey 38–39). Etymologically, family derives from the Latin *familia*, meaning household, and *famulus*, meaning servant. The OED gives as the first recorded usages of the term family, dating back to late medieval times, "[t]he servants of a house or establishment" and "[t]hose descended or claiming descent from a common ancestor" (OED, "family, n." n. pag.). The emphasis in these early usages is on lineage and property to establish status and legal distinction – rather than affection in the shape of familial love. The contemporary use of the term family as denoting "[t]he group of persons consisting of the parents and their children, whether actually living together or not; in wider sense, the unity formed by those who are nearly connected by blood or affinity" is first recorded in John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667) (OED, "family, n." n. pag.). It was first explicitly defined as such in 1829 by James Mill in his *Analysis of the Phe-*

nomena of the Human Mind: "The group which consists of a Father, Mother and Children, is called a Family" (qtd. in OED, "family, n." n. pag.). Unquestionably, the family as a reproductive unit existed prior to modernization. The ideological understanding of family as an affective unit, however, legitimized and maintained by the concepts of separate spheres and romantic love, is a product of modernization (cf. Stacey; Illouz, *Consuming*).[43]

What is commonly assumed to be an ahistorical concept – namely the so-called traditional family – is defined as the 'modern family' by sociologists and thus understood as a developing stage (Stacey 6). This historical form of social organization is believed by many scholars to have emerged as an ideal and practice in Western Europe in the eighteenth century and to have been consolidated during the Victorian era. The modern family (as distinct from the 'pre-modern family' and 'postmodern family' in sociological terminology) is a form of social organization that appears to be motivated exclusively by moral values and romantic love. Yet, the type of family that dominates society at a certain point in history is not a matter of idealism or personal choice, but rather the result of socio-historical and especially economic processes.[44] Resulting from a separation of spheres into private (female) and public (male) that

[43] The affective conception of family is not only a specifically modern but also a specifically Western concept marked by ethnocentricity. This circumstance is often overshadowed by attempts to universalize family. In 1994, for example, the United Nations proclaimed "The International Year of The Family," at once universalizing and essentializing the concept but also pointing to its growing instability if it had to be legitimized in such a manner in the first place (cf. Stacey 38). A paradigmatic example of the artistic ethnocentric and universalizing reproduction of family as central social structure is the photography exhibition "The Family of Man," curated by Edward Steichen (The Museum of Modern Art, New York 1955). In an approach based on structuralist principles, the exhibit and subsequent book of photographs draw parallels and analogies between ethnically and economically diverse groups of people centered on a fixed group of themes such as childbirth, courtship, family life, and death. Such cultural practices impose a "deceptive unity" of a "peculiarly Western and modern concept" onto a wide plurality of forms of communal living (cf. Stacey 38). Stacey maintains that "[s]ome cultures do not employ the category 'family' at all," and "many societies that do use the term do so to depict diverse relationships and to convey diverse meanings" (38). She shows how imperial practices have been striving to establish Western notions of family life in colonized regions: "So convinced have Western governments been of the superiority of their family patterns that they have often imposed their gender and family patterns on conquered people. The United States, for example, disrupted matrilineal and extended kin systems among several indigenous New World cultures by awarding land titles exclusively to male-headed, nuclear household units" (41). She further points out that the notion of the universality of the family contradicts the family as a sign of (white) civilized superiority and vice versa (42).

[44] Criticism of the family as an economical unit and oppressive structure prominently dates back to Friedrich Engels' *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884/1972). Engels gives an account of the origin of the social structure of the capitalist state as based on the capitalist economic structure. His hypothesis is that all class conflict originates from the family as economic unit and that this unit is based on the "domestic

took place during industrialization and turned "men into breadwinners and women into homemakers by separating paid work from households" (Stacey 39–40), the concept of the modern family presupposes specific economic principles, namely those of the middle class. Yet, not until the 1950s did a majority of the population of the United States of American gain access to the economic means that allowed the nuclear family to rely solely on a male breadwinner, and it has mostly eluded the non-white population (Stacey 39–40). Consequently, representations of Western, and particularly North American, domestic life – epitomized in cultural representations such as 1950s television shows like *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* (1952–1966), *Father Knows Best* (1950–1955), or *Leave It to Beaver* (1957–1963) – can be understood as ideologically charged depictions of a social ideal unavailable to large parts of society rather than a general social realty. Idealistic representations of family life, such as these iconic television shows, are therefore not only nostalgic – the "sentimental imagining or evocation of a period of the past" or "longing for familiar surroundings" (OED, "nostalgia, n." n. pag.) – but also *simulacra*, representing not an irretrievable but an inexistent past. As a result, artistic representations of family life take on a socio-cultural function beyond the purely documentary one. Family fiction becomes a vehicle for the proposition of social ideals as well as the hegemonic management of social reality. The contemporary family novel thereby promotes a worldview as well as an image or ideal of the contemporary North American family. This ideal raises a claim to universal validity, but it is also always audience specific.

slavery" of women (137): "The first class opposition that appears in history coincides with the development of the antagonism between man and woman in monogamous marriage, and the first class oppression coincides with that of the female sex by the male" (128–29). Concluding his observations on the family as economic unit, Engels claims that only the abolition of the family as organizational principle of society will bring about absolute legal and economic equality between the sexes and ultimately between the classes (137–38). This hypothesis constitutes the basis not only for many materialist approaches to family and family fiction but also for much feminist criticism of the family and its cultural articulations (cf. Barrett and McIntosh).

Literary Families: Oppressive Structures and Wish-Fulfillment

The emergence of the modern family as a form of social organization in the eighteenth century[45] coincided with the emergence of the family as a popular literary subject. At the same time that the modern family became, if not social reality, then at least a social ideal, family fiction came to dominate the European literary market, especially eighteenth-century British literature (cf. Flint). This circumstance has led to the assumption that family fiction of the eighteenth century documents the victory of the affective nuclear family pattern of the modern type over the pre-modern, extended type. More recent research, however, posits fictional discourse as shaping family ideology rather than reflecting pre-existing social realities (cf. Flint; Armstrong, *Desire*). A study by Robert Hodge and Gunter Kress of how social interests and ideologies are shaped by semiotic systems supports this claim when it states that "patterns of family organization are inevitably sustained and negotiated by means of a myriad set of narratives […]" (qtd. in Richter 211). This hypothesis also accounts for competing and conflicting representations of family in fiction. Christopher Flint shows that the literary representation of family during the eighteenth century was by no means monolithic, but rather contradictory and informed by "the narrative's, as well as the period's, contrary need to make the family appear both normal and mythical, bourgeois and aristocratic, private and public" (1). Flint argues that the novel of the eighteenth century was particularly flexible and able to incorporate "other discourses such as conduct books, philosophical treatises, and demographic studies" (10). Thus combining social discourse with sentimental narratives of middle-class love and life, eighteenth-century literature provided an effective medium for the covert discussion and manipulation of an emergent social order in the shape of the modern family and its ac-

[45] There has been significant socio-historical dispute on whether family progressed or regressed as a social reality in the eighteenth century. Nancy Armstrong and Leonard Tennenhouse, in *The Imaginary Puritan: Literature, Intellectual Labor, and the Origins of Personal Life* (1992), observe that histories of the family reduce family as a historical concept to a sentimental discourse informed by present day conceptions. To them, cultural behaviors shift according to ideological pressures.

companying social, cultural, and economic contexts, such as Enlightenment philosophy and the onset of industrialization. Family fiction of the eighteenth century can therefore be said to have enabled the period's domestic paradigm shifts by harmonizing conflicting conceptions of domesticity through literary representation.

Only in the eighteenth century, as Robert Con Davis claims in an article on the history of family as a literary theme, does the literary family come "into its own" (500), with strong ties between developing middle-class values and literary themes. Yet, family as a theme of literature is arguably as old as literature itself: From Homer's epics to ancient Greek drama, from the Bible to Medieval romance, from Renaissance drama to Victorian and modernist novels – family genealogies and relations are a continuously relevant theme of literary writing. It appears that family fiction gives shape to essential human concerns. And indeed, Sigmund Freud claims that what he calls 'family romance' is in fact the "nature of myth" (238), thereby placing family fiction in a wider cultural framework than genre history: In order to gain independence from the authority of his parents, the child engages in the imaginative activity that Freud calls family romance, an Oedipal fantasy of origin that replaces his parentage with another that suits his desires (e.g., a different father to gain a higher social status, a different mother or sister to be able to sexually desire his own). In Freud's theory, family relations and their imaginative overcoming arguably become the basis of wish-fulfilling fabulation and, significantly, of artistic articulation. This premise can be taken to explain the permanency of family in literary production. Proposing a familial origin for all cultural production, the Freudian premise can further be understood to invert the Marxist dictum of all social developments being motivated by economic forces. This raises the question of whether economic developments shape the family or whether – vice versa – the Oedipal situation determines the social and economic framework. Accordingly, scholarship on family fiction is divided be-

tween Marxists and feminists[46] on the one hand, who emphasize the oppressiveness of familial structure, and Freudians and semiologists on the other, who understand family as an essential metaphor to all cultural articulation (cf. Con Davis). Nonetheless, Engel's claim that the family is "the cellular form of civilized society in which the nature of the oppositions and contradictions fully active in that society can be already studied" (129; cf. von Matt 58–59) and Sigmund Freud's notion that "these day-dreams" of family romance can be "found to serve as the fulfillment of wishes and as a correction of actual life" (238) are not necessarily exclusive. As a minimum, both would concede that the family's (and family fiction's) close relation to the social order allows for the interpretation of one through the other.

The nineteenth century saw "great extremes in the family's development," which were accompanied by a great variety of family fiction, from didactic sentimentalism to social satire (Con Davis 501). Whereas the eighteenth-century fictional family served as a middle-class moral contrast to the decadent aristocracy, the family in nineteenth-century fiction becomes increasingly ambivalent and problematic, before turning into a metaphor for "the modernist malaise" in the early twentieth century (Ru 28). This view of family as a site of social and individual crisis largely dominates twentieth-century fiction, and literary modernism brings experiment to the formal characteristics of family fiction. Turning to North American literary history, examples of formal experimentation in terms of narrative voice and perspective are William Faulkner's family novels *As I Lay Dying* (1930) and *Absalom, Absalom*! (1936). A family novel formally experimenting with representations of sensual perception is John Steinbeck's *East of Eden* (1952). Mid-twentieth-century family novels, particularly of the suburban kind, often oscillate between a sense of oppression and a need for protection, as in the 'Rabbit novels' of John Updike. Updike's tetralogy of Harry "Rabbit" Angstrom's domestic life is

[46] For example, sociologists Michèle Barrett and Mary McIntosh, in their study *The Anti-Social Family* (1991), argue that the family – sexist, classist, racist, and heterosexist in its principles – promotes social inequality and privileges white, affluent, heterosexual males.

probably the best-known example of mid-twentieth-century family fiction. Richard Yates' *Revolutionary Road* (1961) and *The Easter Parade* (1976), John Cheever's *The Wapshot Chronicles* (1957)*, The Wapshot Scandal* (1964)*, Bullet Park* (1969), as well as much of his short fiction, are also concerned with the psychological conflicts of mid-twentieth-century suburban life. Examples of dramatic treatments of family as a site of crisis from the middle of the twentieth century are, for instance, Arthur Miller's play *Death of a Salesman* (1949), Edward Albee's *The Sandbox* (1952) and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* (1962), and Eugene O'Neil's *Long Day's Journey Into Night* (written 1941/42, published 1956).

A large segment of later twentieth-century family fiction was produced by authors belonging to so-called ethnic minorities, who focused in particular on the social and historic circumstances of these communities. Authors of Chinese-American, Hispanic-American, Native-American, Jewish-American, and African-American descent composed numerous compelling fictions of ancestry, genealogy, and intergenerational conflict, for example Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine* (1984), Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street* (1984), Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* (1989), or Philipp Roth's *American Pastoral* (1997). I argue that these novels, with their strong focus on individual as well as community identity, have significantly shaped the WASP renaissance of family fiction at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Postmodern family novels of the late twentieth century, in turn, often articulate a representational crisis, revealing the family to be a conventionalized institution held up and maintained by discursive frameworks,[47] a literary development that corresponds to the changing and increasingly fragmented patterns of Western family life since the 1970s.[48]

[47] Heimito von Doderer's novel *Die Merowinger oder Die Totale Familie* (*The Merovingians or The Total Family*) (1962), in which the protagonist attempts, through marriage, to become his own father, grandfather, father-in-law, and son-in-law, is an example of how postmodern family fiction reveals the discursive character of family relations.

[48] According to United States census data since 2005, more households are made up of unmarried couples than of married ones, and the number of same-sex couples having children has risen (Holson n. pag.). Since as far back as 1996, there have been more children living with single mothers than in a situation resembling the so-called modern family, i.e., "containing a breadwinner and a full-time homemaker mom" (Stacey 45).

Don DeLillo's *White Noise* (1984) and Thomas Pynchon's *Vineland* (1990) are prominent examples of late postmodern family novels, conflating political and popular culture discourses with ironic treatment of family romance while expressing nostalgic longing at the same time.

Contemporary Family Fiction: Family Values and the Postmodern Family

Since the 1990s, sociologists have been observing an unprecedented concern with so-called family values in socio-political as well as cultural terms. The social reality, however, looks strikingly different to the dominant discourse of 'The Family', tacitly understood to be white, middle-class, and economically dependent on a male bread-winner (cf. Stacey). In fact, North American family life is increasingly diverse and does not follow a single pattern. If at all, the "postmodern family condition of diversity, flux, and instability" has become the dominant family pattern, not only in the United States but also throughout Western society (Stacey 46). Accordingly, an article in the *New York Times* titled "Who's on the Family Tree? Now It's Complicated" describes family trees as "tangled" not only by divorce, unmarried households, and adoption but increasingly also by sperm donation and surrogate motherhood (Holson n. pag.). Significantly, the author discusses the growing plurality of families in terms of the difficulties it provokes when it comes to describing these new types of relationships. The genetic definition of the branches of a family tree is being increasingly abandoned or differentiated to make room for family members tied in by emotional bonds (cf. Holson n. pag.). While these new relationships among members of a family are becoming commonplace, the difficulty remains in satisfactorily designating. The problem of the postmodern family becomes foremost, it appears, a semiotic one. As in the case of the shifting social structures and emerging middle-class familial patterns of the eighteenth century, early twenty-first-century family fiction reacts primarily to this semiotic problem.

With the sitcom arguably being the dominant mouthpiece of family ideology since *The Adventures of Harriet and Ozzy*, television productions of the late twentieth century began to negotiate the growing plurality of North American families. Recent television shows such as *Modern Family* (2009–) and *Two and a Half Men* (2003–) follow *The Brady Bunch* (1969–1974) in an attempt to integrate increasingly diverse familial patterns into mainstream popular culture. In the literary field, family novels – particularly those of the 1980s and 1990s – depict patchwork families resulting from divorce and non-heterosexual family models. For instance, Michael Cunningham's novel *A Home at the End of the World* (1990) challenges traditional family constellations by portraying a love triangle between a heterosexual couple and a homosexual man and their attempt to raise a child together, and Stephen McCauley's *The Object of My Affection* (1987) deals with homosexuality, pregnancy, and family within the oppressive heterosexual socio-cultural matrix. Further, family novels depict the increasing plurality and heterogeneity of family life not only in content but also through formal features, such as multiple and often contradictory perspectives.[49] As discussed above, twentieth-century family fiction generally portrays a deterioration of traditional family structures (cf. Ru) and strives to denaturalize them in the process. The family novels of the early twenty-first century, while often retaining characteristic modern and postmodern elements of disruption and fragmentation in content and/or form, significantly shift the objective from destabilization and dissolution to trust-building and rehabilitation. The family discourse and its dialectical implications of community and individualism, nurturing and oppression, private and public spheres, are mobilized to examine contemporary social and semiotic instabilities and address the prevalent sense of crisis in the contemporary culture of the United States of America in a manner, I argue, that is meant to alleviate it. The rhetorical strategy that they employ to achieve this effect is literary sincerity.

[49] Multiperspectivity in family fiction as performed through multiple narrators goes back to William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*, and multiple character focalization as an articulation of family-dissent and generational conflict is found, for example, in Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks* (*The Buddenbrooks*) (1901).

The family novels examined in this study neither simply lament the end of the modern family model – the 'traditional family' – nor can they be reduced to an attempt to re-naturalize an increasingly obsolete form of social organization. Rather, family fiction of the early twenty-first century must be understood in terms of both a boom in conservative family rhetoric and the emergence of what have been tentatively called 'post-postmodernist' tendencies in literature. Elements of this are, for example, a return of social realist aesthetics (cf. Snyder-Körber), a new sentimentalism (cf. Epstein), and a marked interest in corporeality and materiality (cf. Brown, "Materiality"). Family fiction is more often than not subject to formal strategies of literary realism. For instance, Anne Tyler's and Richard Russo's numerous novels, like the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Breathing Lessons* (1988) by Tyler and *Empire Falls* (2001) by Russo, take account of the social and economic strains of lower middle-class and working-class family life in late twentieth-century North America. Richard Ford's novel *The Sportswriter* (1986) and its sequels, *Independence Day* (1995) and *The Lay of the Land* (2006), follow the middle-age life of Frank Bascombe from the death of his son, through divorce, remarriage, failing careers, and finally cancer. Huey Guagliardo emphasizes the strong emotional quality of Ford's use of literary language; Ford himself understands his attention to language as closely linked to what he calls "the fabric of affection that holds people close enough together to survive" (Guagliardo vii). Corporeality plays a significant role in contemporary family fiction in the form of bodily deterioration, illness, and death – for instance Alzheimer's in Franzen's *The Corrections*, cancer in Ford's *The Lay of the Land* and Dave Eggers' *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* (2001), and drug-induced coma in Mathew Sharpe's *The Sleeping Father* (2003). Last but not least, realist contemporary family fiction often features much detailed description of domestic materiality, for instance in O'Nan's *Wish You Were Here* and Franzen's *The Corrections*. For Roland Barthes, this attention to what he

calls "unnecessary detail" produces an effect of reality.[50] Contemporary family novels, I therefore argue, are complex articulations of and reactions to both social and semiotic conflict. With my analysis of two paradigmatic examples of the contemporary renaissance of family fiction, I will demonstrate sincerity to be the central rhetorical strategy within these literary texts, through which trust building is attempted and, arguably, achieved.

[50] For a recent discussion of the role of objects in literature, see Brown's *Material Unconscious* and *Sense of Things*.

I.2.2 A Narrative Form of Family

The preceding section on the literary and social history of family fiction has repeatedly stated that the modern family is a mutable historical form of social organization that depends on particular economic circumstances and follows a specific organizational principle, namely that of genealogy and kinship. It has also been proposed that family fiction does not simply reflect social developments but rather actively partakes in the discourses that shape and maintain the so-called modern family as a dominant social form of organization. It is thus reasonable to examine the relationship between the family form as a social structure and the narrative form of family fiction. Various literary scholars have proposed interconnections between family as a social structure and the narrative form of family fiction that transcend a purely thematic treatment of family in fiction: When speaking of "dynastic principles of traditional narrative," Edward Said employs a genealogical metaphor to speak of a narrative progression in time (139). Tony Tanner maintains that "the genesis of both the modern family and what we call the novel […] are closely interlinked" (*Adultery* 368). Christopher Flint argues that the relationship between family and literary form is not "simply one of ideological or epistemological reflection. It is one in which narrative art translates the values of the family into formal precepts" (19). Robert Lawrence Caserio postulates an analogy between family line and story line in the modern novel. Robert Con Davis extends the argument from family fiction being governed by familial structural principles to critical discourses on the family. Referring to the tension between Marxist and Freudian treatment of family, Con Davis states that "the family metaphor as a complex of 'origin', 'loss', and 'exposure' is a structure implicit in a whole range of critical thought" (509). His examination of the family theme in literature concludes with the statement that "there is indeed a kindred, familial bond between perspectives on the family and the thing called the family" (511). The following subsection will therefore

focus on the form of the family genre in particular as well as on the relationship between family and narrative in general.

Forms of Family Fiction

A correlation can be discerned between the form of the family and the form of its literary representation. For example, the reduction in size of the family as social entity from 'extended' to 'nuclear' can also be observed in the changing form of family fiction. Whereas pre-twentieth-century family novels are often sprawling affairs in terms of page-volume and abundance of characters,[51] post-World War II family plots tend to concentrate on families consisting of only a couple and their children, in some cases also the grandparents or grandchildren, such as the suburban domestic fiction of Yates, Cheever, and Updike. This development of the family from the extended modern family to the isolated nuclear family and then to the so-called post-nuclear family[52] can further be mapped onto the defining structural principles of family fiction: its temporal and spatial dimensions. Yi-ling Ru defines the family novel as a form that puts particular emphasis on the interweaving of a horizontal (synchronic conflict) with a vertical (diachronic genealogy) level of narration:

[51] The most canonical examples of this are of course Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks* (*The Buddenbrooks*), John Galsworthy's *The Forsyte Saga* (1906 - 1921) and its sequels, *A Modern Comedy* (1924–1928, 1929) and *End of the Chapter* (1931–1933, 1934 posthumously). Examples of postmodern generational novels are for instance Jeffrey Eugenides' *Middlesex* (2002) and Maile Meloy's *Liars and Saints* (2003).

[52] Sociologically, the difference between the modern or nuclear and the postmodern or post-nuclear family is one of size, internal organization, and distribution of roles. Whereas the modern, sometimes also 'affective', family is differentiated from the pre-modern or extended family through a narrower definition of its members, the family ties in the postmodern family have become increasingly loose, no longer necessarily dependent on conjugal or marital relation, sometimes including unmarried lovers, friends, and caretakers (cf. Hickman). For sociologist Judith Stacey, the postmodern family (coined by Shorter) "signal[s] the contested, ambivalent, and undecided character of our contemporary family cultures. [...] Like postmodern culture, contemporary Western family arrangements are diverse, fluid, and unresolved. Like postmodern cultural forms, our families today mix unlikely elements in an improvisational pastiche of old and new. The postmodern family condition is not a new model of family life equivalent to that of the modern family; it is not the next stage in an orderly progression of stages of family history; rather, the postmodern family condition signals the moment in that history when our belief in the logical progression of stages has broken down. Modernization narratives about 'the family' [...] once portrayed Western family life as steadily evolving toward a more democratic and progressive form. Rupturing this self-congratulatory and reassuring logic, the postmodern family condition incorporates both experimental and nostalgic dimensions as it lurches forward and backward into an uncertain future" (Stacey 7–8).

> [T]he family novel is developed along a line through the evolution of several generations. The chronology constructs a long, forward-moving vertical structure. At the same time, all kinds of conflicts among family members, including those between fathers and sons, mothers and children, husbands and wives, and between brothers form what might be described as the horizontal structure. The plot of the family novel, therefore, is weaved by these two intersected narrative structures. (36)

Just as family relationships are structured by the linearity of genealogy (vertical) as well as the conjugal relationships and those between family members of one generation (horizontal), the plots of family fiction can be charted on a coordinate plane as developing in terms of time and space. This grid of vertical-temporal and horizontal-spatial axes has served literary scholars to make generic distinctions, for which Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of the chronotope[53] – the interconnectedness of time and space in literature – as bearing "intrinsic *generic* significance" was foundational (Bakhtin 85, emphasis in original). Bakhtin was the first to differentiate systematically between what he calls the "novel of generations" and the "family novel" (231), the latter being defined by its focus on space (e.g., the family home) and the first determined by a progression of time (e.g., the family's lineage).[54] The family novel, according to Bakhtin, is concerned with the reworking of the traditional idyllic space, its reestablishment and its endangerment by intruding forces. According to Bakhtin, the idyllic aspect remains relevant to the novel of generations, yet it is concerned with "the destruction of the idyll, and of the idyllic-type family or patriarchal relationships" (233). This chronotopological analysis allows for a gradual rather than rigid differentiation of the genre. So, for example, in O'Nan's family novel *Wish You Were Here* the chronotopological frame is that of the last week the Maxwell family spends at the lake house: The chapters correspond to the days of the week, beginning

[53] "We understand the chronotope as a formally constitutive category of literature; we will not deal with the chronotope in other areas of culture. In the literary artistic chronotope, spatial and temporal indications are fused into one carefully thought out, concrete whole. Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history. The intersection of axes and fusions of indicators characterizes the artistic chronotope" (Bakhtin 84).

[54] Employing Ru's structuralist research and Bakhtin's notion of the chronotope, Matteo Galli and Simone Costagli – in a recent anthology on the contemporary renaissance of family fiction as a transnational phenomenon – uphold time and space as the defining formal categories of family fiction. They also emphasize a temporal definition for the so-called generational novel, which stretches over a long time span and encompasses several generations, and a spatial definition for the family or, as they call it, conjugal novel (*Eheroman*), concerned with one household rather than a family genealogy (Galli and Costagli 15).

and ending with Saturday. The narrative begins with the arrival at the idyllic family vacation home and ends with the ultimate departure from it, the lake house being sold after the death of the patriarch. In Bakhtin's terms, O'Nan's novel could be characterized as a classic family novel because of the narrative dominance of the idyllic space (the family's lake house). Nonetheless, the structural prominence of time in the novel (albeit contained within one single week) emphasizes the aspect of progression (and destruction) typical of the novel of generations. A rigid definition of *Wish You Were Here*, or any other piece of literary family fiction, as either a family novel or generational novel can therefore be substituted by one of 'degree'.

This study has thus far employed a variety of terminology for the generic form of family fiction: family novel / 'proper' family novel, generational novel / novel of generations, domestic novel / fiction, family romance, and conjugal novel. The terms family saga, family epic, and family chronicle complement this list. Nonetheless, the present study does not subscribe to a fixed definition of family fiction, but rather treats certain traits as defining. Any given literary genre consists of a number of characteristic traits, shared to varying extents by its proponents. As proposed by Alastair Fowler, "genres have to do with identifying and communicating rather than with defining and classifying" (38). Genre, thereby, is not a fixed set of characteristic traits but a number of possible combinations regarding these traits, raising specific expectations in the reader as to the text's form and content, its premise, progress, and ending. Possible combinations of characteristic traits in the family novel include diachronic and synchronic familial character constellations (e.g., father-son or brother-sister); the family home as (formerly) idyllic space; social realism; a characteristic set of conflicts (e.g., conjugal, fraternal, economic) and tropes (e.g., old age, childhood, (loss of) innocence, illness, death); possible autobiographical elements; as well as a particularly intimate narrative perspective, either close to a single protagonist or the family as a whole (achieved, for example, through the forms of memoir, diary, epistolary, or multiperspectivity). Most studies concerned

with literary families avoid rigid definitions of the genre, in part because – as we have seen – family is such a broad and integral theme of Western literatures that it becomes difficult to draw distinct genre lines. Some critics, however, have been concerned with definitions that will, if not clarify all markers of family fiction, at least delineate a specific subgenre of family fiction or the family fiction of a specific time period. For example, Ru gives a definition of the 'proper' family novel, based on her selection of texts,[55] as a sub-genre of the novel, which she claims emerged as a fully distinct category at the beginning of the twentieth century. She defines this sub-genre as having a certain length, being written in a realist style, portraying the decline of a family, being concerned with family rites and subscribing to a certain form which interweaves a horizontal (synchronic conflict) and a vertical (diachronic genealogy) level of narration (2). The family novel according to Ru is therefore concerned with conjugal as well as paternal conflicts that stress the binary dynamic of the old and the new, community and individual, tradition and modernism at work in the family novel (187).

Notable in Ru's account is her effort to clarify the genre from a formal perspective with a view to its chronotopological structure. Kerstin Dell follows Ru in this attempt, yet defines the North American family novel of the latter half of the twentieth century rather than the British and French family novel of the early twentieth century as the 'proper' family novel. In her definition she focuses on the unified multiperspectivity of her selected texts,[56] reflecting the plurality of voices in the family as one body:

> A family novel is generally focused on the conflicts of a two- (or three-)generational (post)nuclear family. These conflicts are connected to a wide range of contemporary socio-economic, cultural, and even

[55] *The Turbulent Trilogy: Family, Spring, Autumn* by Pa Chin (published between 1906 and 1940); *The Forsyte Saga* by John Galsworthy; and *Les Thibault* by Roger Martin du Gard (published between 1922 and 1936). What Ru therefore exemplifies in her study is not only the development of "one of the most common motifs of the novel" (1) – the family – into a structural principle of literary form but also the transnational quality of said motif or genre, transcending the Western hemisphere.

[56] In her study, Dell examines John Cheever's *The Wapshot Chronicles* (1957) as the post-war family novel, Don DeLillo's *White Noise* (1984) as the postmodern family novel, and Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections* (2001) as the *fin de millennium* family novel.

> academic developments and discourses. The protagonist of a family novel is the family as a whole, i.e. the perspectives of its central members are portrayed. (210)[57]

Both Ru's and Dell's definitions of the family novel are prolific for their emphasis on formal aspects of family fictions rather than restricting their definitions solely to thematic categories. Ru claims that the structural paradigms of time and space in family novels mimic the organization of the family as a social entity; in turn, Dell claims that the focalization of family novels imitates the intrinsic multiperspectivity of families and gives the external impression of a unit. Both scholars thus emphasize the correlation between the form of the family and the form of its literary representation.

Family as a Structural Principle of Narrative

As discussed above, family is neither universal nor natural, yet it appears to govern all Western forms of social organization and their articulation. Accordingly, in her study on the family novel, Ru claims to have found "a grammar that all signifying systems obey," namely that of the binary relation between "individual and collective" as well as "between one family and the world" (83). However, rather than revealing a master-structure that underlies all human forms, the dominance of family as a structural principle discloses a fundamental as well as reciprocal alliance between family as social and family as semiotic form. So, if family fictions influence the social form and living families give shape to the novelistic form, family can be understood as a cultural grammar, as a semiotic pattern, perpetuated, for example, though literary discourse and informing socio-cultural structures (i.e., family as a metaphor). Even further, family appears as a cognitive structure – governing articulation already at the level of language production (i.e., the underlying principles of linearity and metonymy). In his study *The Matrix of Narrative: Family Systems and the Semiotics of Story* (1990), Denis Jonnes

[57] Roger Boyers likewise claims that the 'real' family novel is one which does not focus on one aspect or one member but on the family as a whole, and makes you 'feel' like a member of that fictional family in the reading process (21).

examines the relationship between the social system of family and the narrative system of storytelling. Jonnes' claim is that all narrative meaning in Western society is generated and becomes intelligible through the structure of kinship. He does not restrict his argument to narratives that could be in a strict sense conceived of as family fiction, or even to a specific literary epoch and instead extends his thesis to narrative in general. According to Jonnes, the reciprocity between social and literary family can be found at the basic narrative level of any text, and therefore the text does not even have to be about family issues to be conceived in terms of kinship.

In his analysis of plot structures,[58] Jonnes builds on Patricia Tobin's claim that story as a type of utterance is intelligible only when conceived in terms of family, meaning both genealogy (linear progress) and kinship (metonymic relations). In *Time and the Novel. The Genealogical Imperative* (1978), Tobin locates the question of the temporality of narrative within the semantic field of family. Essentially, Tobin draws parallels between realist narrative, the organization of the sentence, and genealogy and kinship as following the principles of linearity and metonymy:

> By an analogy of function, events in time come to be perceived as begetting other events within a line of causality similar to the line of generations, with the prior events earning a special prestige as it is seen to originate, control, and predict future events. […] The same linear decorum pervades the structure of realistic narrative: all possibly random events and gratuitous details are brought into an alignment of relevance, so that at the point of conclusion all possibility has been converted into necessity within a line of kinship – the subsequent having been referred to the prior, the end to the beginning, the progeny to the father. Thus in life and literature, a line has become legitimized because our causal understanding […] has been conditioned by our existential experience of genealogical descent and destiny. (7–8)

Tobin insists that the concept of linear dominance, what she calls the genealogical imperative, informs all of Western thought and articulation. Both family and fiction are intelligible be-

[58] Jonnes proposes a system of six possible phases of familial interaction that underlie any articulation understood as story: childhood, transit, courtship, conjugal, parenting, death. He further suggests a systema of the fictional representation of family: correlative (autobiographical), projective (idealizing), disjunctive (critical of family), metaphoric (recoding another order of institutionalism in familialist terms), and hypostatic (family as self-sustaining relational grid, e.g., psychoanalysis) (249–51).

cause they are articulated in terms of a beginning, a meaningful sequence, and an end. In the same way that the individual becomes 'legible' only when articulated in terms of kinship – that is, intersubjective relationships – words and sentences relate in a metonymical fashion to produce meaning. "There is a line to language in general," Tobin proposes, "in which, taking the sentence as a family of words and the unit of meaning, sentences grow by the same principle of serial generation, whereby sequences imply their own terminations, and closure can be traced back to origin" (8). The reciprocity of family and story therefore consists in the tacit understanding of both entities in terms of metonymic relationships and linear progress. As a result, it becomes difficult to separate family fiction from other cultural practices and nearly impossible to find any cultural articulation that cannot be related or reduced to family as a structural principle.

Reasons for and Functions of Family Fiction

Because family can arguably be understood as an all-pervasive cultural grammar and has been an incessant topic of literary writing, it might seem redundant to speak of a renaissance[59] of family fiction for any specific period. And yet, during certain periods family discourse becomes particularly dominant. According to sociologist Judith Stacey, the 1990s were such a period: "Never before in our history have so many voices clamored to speak in the name of 'The Family'. As the millennium approaches, the rhetoric of family values has become ubiquitous, often histrionic, sometimes ludicrous" (1–2). Diana Heller relates Stacey's diagnosis of a dramatic increase in concern with the family in the 1990s to the cultural and academic realm:

[59] In their contribution to an anthology on German family novels in an international context, Simone Costagli and Matteo Galli confirm the so-called 'renaissance of family fiction' for the German literary market, but make clear that they consider it a global, or at least Western, phenomenon. They cite Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections* as an example of the renaissance of family fiction (9). The expression is used particularly in German literary scholarship (cf. Galli and Costagli 18; Fleig; Löffler).

> The current rhetoric of familial crisis and recuperation may also be said to operate at the level of popular narrative, or as a semiotic network that frames everything from legislative proceedings to commercial advertising to coverage of sports spectacles […] Nor is the myth-(re)making apparatus exclusive to the realm of law, politics, or the popular culture industry. In academic circles, in those disciplines that continue to constitute, however precariously, the field of the humanities, family has become the focus of much scholarly interest and classroom debate. As a literature instructor, I've been impressed by a discernible increase in literature anthologies and journals centered around family themes" (3).[60]

If family, as established above, is an omnipresent yet fully naturalized and thus invisible structure in Western society, tacitly informing all cultural production, then a sudden visibility of the family discourse can be seen to point to a change in the social fabric or, at least, to a change in the perception thereof. One deduction would be that an increase in family discourse may point to a crisis in the family as social institution. The weakening of traditional social structures seems to call for their affirmation through other, for example literary, channels. And indeed, an emphasis on so-called family values in public discourse is a tacit acknowledgement of the decline of the modern family. This is also Stacey's line of argumentation when she relates a heightened concern with family values since the 1990s to the socio-historical shift from the modern to the postmodern sociological family model (49).

However, it must not be a crisis of the social institution of the family per se that triggers a preoccupation with family in the arts. A fixation on family is commonly also a sign of broader socio-cultural pressures. Historian Linda Gordon claims that: "For at least 150 years […] there have been periods of fear that 'the family' […] was in decline and these fears have tended to escalate in periods of social stress" (qtd. in Stacey 6). A preoccupation with family values in cultural production and the widespread assumption that 'The Family' is in danger indicates a heightened pressure on the overall social and cultural framework (Heller 3–4). Much like the rise of new sincerity, the return of the family to middle-brow literary discourse[61]

[60] An issue of the literary magazine *Granta* (1991) was dedicated to family as well as issues of the German literary magazines *Literaturen* (2005) and *Kritische Ausgabe* (2010).
[61] Contrary to the perceived return of family fiction, Jörg Richter points out the continuity of the writing and reading of family fiction in recent North American literary history – during the so-called postmodern period –,

therefore points to a larger sense of crisis. I propose that both the renewed emphasis on sincerity and the contemporary renaissance of family fiction are thereby best understood as alleviating strategies to counter a deep sense of cultural crisis that transcends a crisis of the family as social institution. Similarly to sincerity, family offers both an affective realm and a normative framework to evoke stability in times of social and semiotic destabilization. There exists a correlation between family, realism, and sincerity – acute to the contemporary cultural climate – that finds an expression in the renaissance of family fiction. An objective of this study is therefore to call attention to their symbiosis and elicit possible reasons for this constellation and its functions within contemporary North American culture.

Reasons given for the return of family fiction to North American literature in the early twenty-first century range from the demographic to the psychological, from the political to the literary historical. For one, the fictional family serves as a foil and/or metaphor for a discussion of larger socio-political issues (cf. von Matt). In an article on the contemporary popularity of family fiction, Sigrid Löffler points to the way in which North American authors employ the genre of the family novel to draw attention to current socio-political issues, such as immigration, ethnical integration, and gender politics. She names Franzen's family novel *The Corrections* as the main proponent of a contemporary renaissance of family fiction, but also cites Jeffrey Eugenides' generational novel *Middlesex* (2002) as an 'ethnic' counterpart to the white, middle-class family novel (20).[62] Other reasons for the contemporary popularity of family novels are changes in the North American demographic make-up: the shift from the nuclear modern to the more malleable postmodern family pattern and a significant reduction in family size (cf. Shorter, Stacey). These result in a compensational reading of novels depict-

for one, in novels of the so-called minority literatures and, for another, in the fiction of the conservative mainstream of the 1970s and 80s (207–08).

[62] Löffler indeed claims that the fetishization of the oriental and exotic is a reason for the family novel's popularity, presumably on the European market (20). This, however, would be a reductionist claim for the North American literary market, as minority literatures assume a different role in North American than in European literature.

ing traditional and/or extended families. Jörg Richter backs this hypothesis of a compensational reading of family novels by citing diminished fertility rates and changing family patterns as determining factors for a rise in family fiction at the turn of the millennium (211). To further support this claim, he quotes psychological research that determines a function of fiction to be the simulation of social experience.[63] In this line of argument, family novels offer (the simulation of) a particular social experience that is declining in contemporary Western societies.

In a similar manner, in "The Rise of Fictionality" Catherine Gallagher proposes fiction as an "exercise" based on the special relationship of fiction to "provisionality" (347). In her argument, the eighteenth-century European novel can explore reality because it does not claim to be real: "In short, the novel provided its readers a seemingly free space in which to temporarily indulge imaginative play" (347). Her essay traces how the perception of fiction shifted during the course of the eighteenth century from the category of 'deceit' to that of 'imagination' – without being 'fantasy' (338–339) Novelistic fiction creates a realm for the reader in which to practice sympathy and moral judgment by entering into a play of identification with and distance to the fictional characters. According to Gallagher, this is enabled by the characters' aporetic status as both nonexistent and familiar:

> Characters' peculiar affective force, I propose, is generated by the mutual implication of their unreal knowability and their apparent depth, the link between their real nonexistence and the reader's experience of them as deeply and impossibly familiar. Because we know their accessibility means fictionality, we are inclined to surrender to the other side of their double impact: their seductive familiarity, immediacy, and intimacy. (356)

This "familiarity, immediacy, and intimacy" of novelistic characters' inner lives, I propose, is primarily achieved through techniques of literary sincerity. The resulting accessibility of the characters' inner lives is in itself a marker of fictionality. Gallagher argues that the reader can

[63] Richter cites Mar and Oatley's "The Function of Fiction is the Abstraction and Simulation of Social Experience" (2008): "Literary fiction allows us to experience social situations vicariously […]." (211).

engage with novelistic characters emotionally, and thereby practice for reality, precisely because of the distance that accompanies fictional intimacy. Citing Ann Banfield's work, Gallagher claims that the depiction of a character's subjectivity is always accompanied by markers of fictionality. The fictionality of intimacy is thus never absolutely veiled: "Competent readers understand that the seemingly intimate revelations of the character's depth are also revelations of its textual nature" (356). According to Gallagher, in third-person narration this is achieved through grammatical markers of fictionality, for example in free indirect discourse, and in first-person narratives through an indication of the difference between narrator and implied author. I will illustrate this observation in my analysis of Robinson's and Franzen's literary sincerity as well as the accompanying self-revelation of its 'craftedness'

The contemporary family novel does not simply register and affirm social processes, but the relationship is reciprocal: By producing a popular image of the ideal family, fictional families shape the social institution. In this manner, the contemporary realist family novel can be understood as a corrective simulation. In her contribution to a survey of North American fiction at the beginning of the twenty-first century (cf. Domsch), MaryAnn Snyder-Körber calls contemporary family fiction the "Ground Zero of American narrative," combining in this wordplay the fundamental character of the family subject to North American fiction with its renewed relevance after the events of September 11, 2001. Snyder-Körber understands what she calls the new social family novel to be an instance of nostalgia:[64] Oriented toward the past to both "ground the present" and "guide the future" (39, my translation), the contemporary family novel emerges from her argument as a restorative return to family values as well as a rejuvenation of the family genre. Drawing on the title of Jonathan Franzen's novel *The Cor-*

[64] The OED locates the origins of the word 'nostalgia' in the ancient Greek term for "return home" and gives as one meaning the "[a]cute longing for familiar surroundings, esp. regarded as a medical condition; homesickness" ("nostalgia, n." n. pag.). Understood as a "sentimental imagining or evocation of a period of the past" ("nostalgia, n." n. pag.), Freud's family romance can be understood as an instance of nostalgia as well, when the child "is turning away from the father whom he knows to-day to the father in whom he believed in the earlier years of his childhood; and his phantasy is no more than the expression of a regret that those happy days have gone" (Freud 241).

rections, she therefore frames the return to the literary family as an attempt to correct not only postmodern society but also postmodern literature (42): The post-postmodern family novel is an expression of a renewed interest in referential realism as both pathos and social engagement.[65] It must be placed within the context of a desire for socio-cultural as well as semiotic stability. I propose that the social and semiotic instability that is addressed by the family novel is the same crisis that is addressed by the rhetoric of sincerity. In this line of argument, family novels react to the destabilizing socio-cultural effects and cultural conflicts brought on by rapid globalization, reflected, for example, in the plurality of geographical settings and the multiperspectivity of contemporary North American family novels (Richter 208). As an example of the family novel of globalization, Richter cites George Hagen's novel *The Laments* (2005), and Eugenides' *Middlesex* is a further example of this. An instance of the multicultural family novel is Anne Tyler's *Digging to America* (2006), which juxtaposes the perspectives of a WASP family with an American-Iranian one. As discussed, the proliferation of digital media and consequently the increasingly indirect and virtual character of communication are further sources for a contemporary desire for substantiality expressed in the return to referential realism (cf. Gumbrecht; Foster; Brown, "Materiality"). These cultural changes have induced a sense of instability that catalyzes the popularity of the family genre as the family is "aimed at harmony" (Flint 4).

Finally, family novels emerge from a conservative socio-political climate. Snyder-Körber cites the neo-conservative political climate during the presidency of George W. Bush Jr. as a

[65] Snyder-Körber further relates the current popularity of the family motif to the heightened critical and artistic interest in other phenomena that can be understood as symptoms of this 'return to the real', namely the body, religion, so-called family values in law and politics, biographical literary forms and modes of referential representation: "The body, the somatic basis to all experience, is central not only to a theoretical engagement with art and aesthetic experience but also to new forms of memory and museum culture. In religion, law, and politics a distinct fundamentalism is linked with a commitment to 'family values'. Simultaneously […] auto/biographical forms receive increasingly more public appraisal. Fiction approaches this spoiled by success competition by adopting modes of realist narration that are less reminiscent of Raymond Carver's minimalism than of a much older maximalism: the sprawling social novels of William Dean Howells or Henry James. […] Those are developments that can all be described as instances of a 'return' to the real" (Snyder-Körber 39–40, my translation).

determinative factor in the rise of the contemporary social family novel (46). This resonates with a strand of criticism that judges family fiction to be conservative per se, both in content (cf. Keith) and form (cf. Thody).[66] However, whether a family novel is complicit with conservative social structures or particularly suitable to the critique of such cannot be generalized for the entire genre. Family fiction nurtures nostalgia for a past ideal of family life (functioning as simulacrum), thereby addressing a contemporary sense of cultural exhaustion induced by the intense self-referentiality of the postmodern period in theory, art, and popular culture. Nonetheless, the renaissance of the family novel is neither purely a result of so-called postmodern fatigue nor exclusively the effect of strong conservatism at the end of the twentieth century. Instead, family novels can be seen to manage social and aesthetic pressures and developments in contemporary North American society. What is more, because of their chronotopological flexibility, family novels allow for the negotiation of a particularly broad spectrum of differences and changes in feeling and social mores, both diachronically (between generations) and synchronically (between members of a family). Rather than constituting a *Biedermeier* retreat into the private sphere, family novels are therefore best understood as agents of affective crisis management. The stability that family novels can provide is one of emotional reassurance based on the familiarity of its content and form (e.g., the genealogical imperative of narrative, referential realism). Indeed, familial sentimentality (*Familiengefühligkeit*) constitutes an agreement between literary work and recipient, providing a common frame for otherwise disparate planes of the perception and experience of reality (Richter 215).

[66] In an essay tellingly entitled "To Hell with the Family!" (1987), W.J. Keith criticizes the prevailing academic interest in family fiction for ignoring literary qualities, equating an interest in the literary family with a literal interest in the social family. Philipp Thody, in his essays on "The Politics of the Family Novel: Is Conservatism Inevitable?" (1969), makes a structural rather than thematic argument and asks whether "[…] there [is] something in a particular literary genre, such as the family novel, which somehow leads virtually every writer who touches it to defend the values of stability and order which are essential if the institution of the family is so prosper to survive" (89). His criticism is ultimately of literary realism as affirmative of the status quo. Discussing the novels of Anne Tyler, Elizabeth Mahn Nollen claims that the contemporary criticism of family fiction often draws derogatory parallels to trivial culture and low art such as soap operas (217).

I.2.3 Familiar Forms: Sincerity and Family Fiction

Family novels share with the rhetorical strategy of sincerity the affinity to crisis as well as the ability to establish connections between otherwise incommensurate pluralities. I do not claim that articulations of sincerity in contemporary culture are by any means restricted to the family novel, or even to literature. I propose, however, that, because of the familiarity of its content and form, family fiction is particularly suited for literary sincerity.

I have established several parallels between new sincerity and the renaissance of family fiction, such as their shared affinity to a contemporary sense of cultural crisis. Both phenomena can be further located within the framework of an encompassing desire for the real, catalyzed and endowed with ethical meaning by the events of 9/11 but induced earlier in the 1990s by a proliferation of new media and a sense of epistemological uncertainty that has been referred to as postmodern anxiety (cf. Foster; Markovits; Snyder-Körber). Another parallel is their common dominance during the eighteenth century: Sincerity gained profound cultural and aesthetic value during this period (cf. Bierwirth), and this development coincided with the emergence of family fiction as a discursive negotiation of social organization and conduct (cf. Flint). As cultural practices, family fiction and sincerity idealized emergent middle-class values to the extent that they outweighed those of the declining aristocracy. Further, both promoted the evolving modern individual by managing the balance between self-interest and obligation to the collective: Sincerity provided a communicational mode that allowed for the intelligible articulation of feeling; family fiction instructed the new middle class in the practice of familial love and offered a metaphor for the organization of community. In the process, family fiction and the sincerity discourse of the eighteenth century naturalized that which they helped to incite: the modern individual and the modern family (cf. Armstrong, *Desire*; Illouz, *Consuming*). From this perspective, contemporary family fiction gains relevance as an object of critical reflection not despite but due to its ‘avowal of feeling’.

This immense success of both sincerity and family fiction can further be ascribed to a fundamental development during this period:[67] the so-called 'separation of spheres' into private and public (cf. Sennett). Rooted in the seventeenth century and perpetuated through a separation of living and working quarters during the advancing industrialization in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the distinction between the private and public realms was eventually naturalized by social and artistic discourses. Significantly, the separation of spheres facilitated an association of emotional expression with the private sphere and emotional restraint with the public sphere. This divide can also be conceptualized in terms of sincerity and authenticity. Charles Lindholm maintains that, during the eighteenth century, "[t]he workplace came to be pictured as a battleground, where combatants must put on carapaces and conceal their true feeling selves behind standardized roles, which may only be shed at home, among family and friends" (6). However, if sincerity, as discussed above, is understood as a social mask that allows individuals to interact meaningfully through the employment of conventionalized (and therefore recognizable) forms for the representation of intimate feeling, then the mask no longer appears as a social barrier, but rather as an instrument of intersubjective connection. The juxtaposition of "true feeling selves" in the family home and "standardized roles" on the "battleground" of the public sphere loses its severity, because true selves assume standardized form to become communicable. The long-established association of family with 'true' emotional expression thereby remains essential to the form that articulations of sincerity assume because performances of sincerity – a highly controlled and conventionalized articulation of emotion – have to appear authentic – raw, uncontrolled, spontaneous – to be credible. Importantly, they have to appear to be tacitly familiar.

[67] This period of deep socio-cultural overthrow, lasting from about 1750 to 1870, is sometimes referred to as *Sattelzeit*, a term coined by Reinhart Koselleck. It denotes the transition from the early modern period to the modern period and encompasses wide-ranging demographical, infrastructural, economical, and social changes spurred by the Enlightenment and the French Revolution. Key cultural concepts, such as state, citizen, and family, are fundamentally renegotiated in this period. The metaphor of the saddle refers to the geographical anticline and illustrates the notion of transition between epochs (cf. Koselleck).

As discussed above, sincerity is a rhetorical strategy for the production of trust in unstable social situations; in order to gain trust, the sincere sender employs rhetorical forms that the receiver will perceive as familiar and thus as transparent. The apparent transparency of the rhetorical form is translated into the accessibility of what is being communicated and hence into the moral sincerity of the sender and/or the message. Therefore, family – a social order made to appear ahistorical – lends itself to articulations of sincerity – an affective discourse made to appear non-discursive. Although both concepts are subject to representational conventions and changing ideological imperatives, the notion that family is somehow more transparent and accessible than any other social order, and in itself a source of meaning, remains a common assumption. This conception is based on the family's status as tacit knowledge. As discussed above, the concept of tacit knowledge refers to knowledge that is habitually acquired and culturally shared without any necessary awareness of the acquired character of this knowledge. Tacit knowledge is trans-individual and shared culturally, both directly – through the daily experience of family life – and indirectly – through cultural representations of family such as family novels, televised situational comedies, or visual art representations of family. Through its naturalized character, tacit knowledge informs the ideology of a group, its beliefs, and its values. Although the properties of family and genealogy can be given as explicit knowledge, the seemingly unlearned, immediate recognition and acceptance of family as natural and ahistorical is based on its status as tacit knowledge. Contemporary authors who have turned to family in their fiction recognize that the family novel creates a space for tacit recognition that is subsequently translated into categories of transparency and accessibility, which in turn evoke sincerity.

Homely and Real

Returning to Stewart O'Nan's family novel *Wish You Were Here*, Ken's "trouble" becomes apparent as one of a conflict between sincerity and authenticity:

> He thought of a whole book of fishing shots, the total subculture – men and their sons, their boats and gear – done in that flat style like Bill Owens' *Suburbia*. It was precisely this kind of abstract thinking that got him into trouble. The Holga was supposed to make him feel the shot, not just see it. And he'd never taken Sam fishing, not once. He turned into the marina road and the trees opened up, giving him a half-mile view across the raised plain of the fishery to the highway. Vapor rose off the ponds, caught in the pasty gray tree line like gun smoke, a Michael Kenna effect, majestic and fake. He wanted something homely and real. He hoped there would be herons, and that the Holga could get him close enough. (57)

On the surface, it seems that Ken's problem is rooted in the attempt to represent an experience he does not share: Conceptualizing a book of photographs on the subculture of fishing and the connotations of male bonding and father-son relationships it carries, Ken lacks the authentic emotional experience and thus fails to convincingly represent it: The relationship to his own father was distant and "he'd never taken [his son] Sam fishing, not once." Ken does not "feel the shot" like he is supposed to. The literary form of this passage, however, reveals the conflict to lie in a false opposition of 'real' and 'fake'. In the quoted passages, Ken locates his own work in relation to other artists': While Bill Owens' *Suburbia* – arguably the most iconic photographic representation of post-war domestic life in the USA – has a particular "flat style" that Ken aspires to, Michael Kenna's not less iconic, dramatic black-and-white landscapes – images of blurred clouds, rivers, and waterfalls achieved though long exposure times and the manipulation of negatives in postproduction – serve as an antipode. The ostensible implication here is that Owens' work is somehow more 'real' than Kenna's.

Yet, as this contrast between the two photographic styles is translated into literary form, the opposition between flat style and majestic effect becomes arbitrary: The passage opens with a sequence of paratactic statements – "a whole book of fishing shots, the total subculture

– men and their sons, their boats and gear" – imitating the flat aesthetic of Owens' work. The elliptic phrases are reminiscent of snapshots inviting interpretation and – through the explicit reference to photographic "shots" – visualization. The evocative "shots" of male familial bonding contained in the paratactic sentence structure are then contrasted by a drastic shift in tone and style: The line "[v]apor rose off the ponds, caught in the pasty gray tree line like gun smoke" translates the "Michael Kenna effect" into literary form: In the first half of the sentence, the Os in "vapor," "rose," "off," and "ponds" form an assonance, and the 'v' and the 'f's form a consonance. The As in "pasty" and "gray," the Is in "line" and "like," and the open and round vowel sounds in "caught," "gun," and "smoke" produce another assonance, while the K sounds in "caught," "like," and "smoke" produce a hard consonance that contrasts with the soft consonance of the G in "gray" and "gun." The aesthetic effect is one of flowing and blurring, of an exaggerated poetization that contrasts sharply with the preceding parataxis, evocative of the visual style of Kenna. What the passage's rapid shift between prosaic paratactic and flowing poeticized sentences illustrates is that any representational effect, whether flat or majestic, stems from rhetorical technique and that, further, a seemingly immediate articulation of feeling – the sincerity that Ken admires in Owens' work – depends on conventionalized forms of signification. The flat style that Ken strives to achieve is not immediately recognizable as a representational convention, but its reduced aesthetic form – its plain style – is no more 'real' than the exaggerated, 'fake' form. Family – in photography as much as in literature – is no more 'real' than any other subject. However, its paramount yet tacit role in the shaping of the social as well as semiotic order allows contemporary family fiction to appear "homely and [therefore] real."

I.2.4 Contemporary American Family Novels

Single Perspective

Before turning to the analysis of two paradigmatic examples of contemporary family fiction, it is worth considering the wider literary phenomenon. As indicated earlier, the contemporary renaissance of family novels manifests itself in the heightened critical attention to the genre in cultural journalism and scholarship (cf. Costagli and Galli, Richter, Snyder-Körber, Dell, and Löffler) as well as in the abundance of 'middle-brow' family novels published in the first decade of the twenty-first century. For an overview of this renaissance, the novels can be grouped according to various elements. Because narrative perspective is the most basic instrument for the writing of inner lives, it will serve as the primary distinguishing feature of family fiction from the angle of sincerity. Accordingly, contemporary family novels can be divided into two categories in terms of their narrative perspective: single or multiple. Within these two broad categories, the novels can be further differentiated according to how the single perspective or multiperspectivity is achieved: Novels with a single perspective are either told in the third person with an exclusive focalization of one particular character or – more commonly – voiced through a first-person narrator. Two examples from the first category are Marilynne Robinson's *Home* (2008) and *Lila* (2014), retellings of her previous novel *Gilead* (2004) analyzed in chapter two. In *Home*, the events of the preceding text are presented from the perspective of a secondary character in *Gilead*: Glory Boughton, the daughter of Robert Boughton, the best friend of *Gilead*'s protagonist John Ames. In *Lila*, the perspective is that of Ames' young, second wife of the same name, who – although immensely significant to the protagonist's state of mind – has appeared only 'on the margins' in *Gilead*.

More recent novels shift from a first-person to a third-person narrator, and from generational to family novel. Whereas *Gilead* spans four generations of men by the name of John

Ames, relating their life stories in a fictional letter from father to son, *Home* – as the title suggests – is determined by the spatial element of a family home rather than the temporal element of passing generations. The first text examines the history of a fictional Midwestern town through the lives of the men in a family of preachers and through the eyes of one of them. The second and third texts reevaluate this community in the narrative present of 1956 through, first, the eyes of a disillusioned woman returning to her childhood home to care for her dying father and, later, a young woman who experienced severe hardship before she became the minister's wife. A further example of a sequel's shift towards the perspective of a focalized third person is Stewart O'Nan's *Emily, Alone* (2011), succeeding the above-quoted family novel *Wish You Were Here*. The more recent *Emily, Alone* shifts the focalization – as the title suggests – from the earlier novel's multiplicity of characters' inner views to the single perspective of an aging matriarch. As discussed above, the family home is a central element of the genre as well as a trope of sincerity. Many family novels emphasize the materiality of the house in frequent and/or extended passages of realist description, such as in *Wish You Were Here*, *Home*, and *The Corrections*. At times, these passages produce a 'reality effect' (Barthes) through the incorporation of seemingly insignificant material detail; at other times, descriptions of certain parts of a family home acquire symbolic meaning. In some cases, the house as a whole becomes symbolic for the state of the fictional family itself and/or the social institution:[68] A common motif of the family novel is the loss of the family home due to either economic reasons or the aging and/or foreseeable death of the patriarch/matriarch.

Prominent examples of the single perspective in contemporary family fiction by way of a first-person narrator besides *Gilead* are Jeannette Walls' autobiographical account of her nomadic and impoverished childhood in *The Glass Castle. A Memoir* (2005) and the successively published, novelized biography of her maternal grandmother, *Half Broke Horses. A True-*

[68] This is most prominently the case in Edgar Allan Poe's short story "The Fall of the House of Usher" (1839).

Life Novel (2010) – mentioned briefly in the preceding text. Whereas the first text is narrated by an autobiographical first-person narrator, largely focalizing her "experiencing self" as a child (Stanzel 212), the latter is told as if from a first-person perspective of the author's grandmother. As in some of the previous examples, economic hardship and loss are central themes of Walls' family novels, and the unconventionality of the portrayed family is another. Nonconformity in family fiction is often born from the social circumstance accompanying economic hardship and loss, as in the similarly autobiographical *Running with Scissors* (2002) by Augusten Burroughs and *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* (2000) by Dave Eggers. Both novels are again first-person narratives and feature disrupted families with children left behind to largely care for themselves. The black comedy of Burroughs' novel focuses on a family of eccentrics that the child protagonist encounters after his mother suffers a psychotic breakdown and leaves him in the care of her psychiatrist. Eggers' novel features a gentler humor when recapitulating the Eggers brothers' attempts to live a self-sufficient life after their parents' deaths. The novel's blunt descriptions of sickness, death, and mourning are presented with wry sentimentalism, associating the novel with the recent literary movements of post-irony (cf. postirony.com; Konstantinou) and new sentimentalism (cf. Epstein). The author's preface to the novel further emphasizes the sincerity of the narrative – a 'truthful' representation of interiority – and with a metafictional gesture proposes that, if the reader wishes to heighten the immediacy of the narrative, they can request a digital version of the text in which Eggers will replace the protagonist's name with that of the reader. Last but not least, depression, sickness, and death are themes of another salient example of first-person narration in contemporary family fiction: Chang-Rae Lee's novel *Aloft* (2004). The protagonist is an Updikean middle-class baby boomer struggling with the emotional expectations placed on him by his family. While the suppressed suicide of his first wife continues to impact the family, the first-person narrator also has to come to terms with his pregnant daugh-

ter's cancer. The strength of this particular first-person narration derives from the frequent and distinct shifts in grammatical tense from past to present, effecting presentness and the reader's proximity to the narrated events and the figural mind.

Before turning to contemporary family fiction that features a multiperspectivity often considered characteristic of the genre (cf. Dell), a third set of novels should be identified: family novels largely presented from a 'single-person' perspective that introduce other voices into the narrative. One example from this group is Jeffrey Eugenides' winding generational novel *Middlesex*. The novel traces the incestuous genetic heritage of the 'hermaphrodite' protagonist and recounts his gender transition from woman to man. By occasionally transforming into the third-person narrator of his ancestors' life stories, the homodiegetic first-person narrator allows for the focalization of other figural minds than his own. A second technique for the introduction of multiple voices into a family novel otherwise largely narrated from a single point of view consists in the incorporation of other, often private text types into the novel's narrative. Nick Flynn's autobiographical novel *Another Bullshit Night in Suck City* (2004) gives an account of the author's substance abuse as well as his father's alcoholism and descent into homelessness. The narrator repeatedly refers to his mother and brother, but the central relationship of the novel is that between father and son. Working at a homeless shelter, the protagonist is forced to reexamine this relationship when his father becomes a resident in the same institution. The first-person narrator's perspective is frequently interspersed with fragments from the older man's writing, particularly his personal letters. Similarly, Siri Hustvedt incorporates excerpts from her late father's memoir into *The Sorrows of an American* (2008).[69] Her novel follows a psychiatrist and his sister on a quest to uncover a secret that, they suppose, holds the key to fully understanding their withdrawn and recently deceased

[69] Hustvedt's novel *The Blazing World* (2014) furthers this technique of multiperspectivity by assuming the form of an edited collection of diary entries, written statements, interview transcripts, and articles by and about the fictional artist Harriet Burden. While not primarily a family novel, *The Blazing World* and the earlier *What I Loved* (2003) nonetheless foreground family relationships.

father. The autobiographical segments, also composed in the first person, are set apart from the rest of the text through cursive type and ascribed to the fictional father in the novel. By adding a second first-person perspective to the novel, the excerpts deepen the 'inner view' – similar to the shifting focalization of multiperspectivity in other family novels – by way of contrasting figural minds. They are revealed as autobiographical material only in the author's afterword. Both Flynn and Hustvedt thus operate with the apparent authenticity of the incorporated material – in the empirical sense of not having been 'made-up' as well as the apparent autonomy of the fragments – to endow their texts with a heightened sense of immediacy. In both cases, the 'opacity' of the inserted autobiographical material brings out the 'transparency' of the protagonist's inner view, evoking the sincerity of the representation.

Multiperspectivity

Turning now to the multiperspectivity of family fiction: This characteristic juxtaposition of perspectives is generally achieved either through a changing focalization of characters' perspectives via a third-person narrator or – less commonly – through a combination of several first-person narrators. As an example from the latter category, Michael Kimball's debut novel *The Way the Family Got Away* (2000) alternates between the perspectives of two child narrators. The protagonists are siblings, on the road with their parents to their grandfather's house where they plan to bury the body of their deceased baby brother, transported in the trunk of the car. The novel also catalogues the sale of a household, as the family sells their possessions item by item for food and gasoline. The chapters are attributed to the respective narrator only indirectly via deictic markers and characteristic differences in their level of diction. Another example of this particular narrative perspective, as well as of a child narrator, is Jonathan Safran Foer's 9/11 novel *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005), which alternates between the perspective of an autistic child traumatized by his father's death on September 11,

2001 and that of his grandparents – themselves traumatized survivors of the Holocaust. Having found a key that belonged to his father, the boy Oscar sets out on a secret quest to find its lock and in so doing comes to terms with his loss. The grandfather's narrative takes the form of letters to the protagonist and the protagonist's deceased father, with chapters entitled "Why I'm not where you are" and dated from 1963 to 2003. In these letters, Oscar's grandfather attempts to explain his absence and increasing silence to his son, Oscar's late father. Paternal and parental absence as well as its anticipation can therefore be cast as the theme of another common subgroup of contemporary family fiction, further including Robinson's, Eggers', Burroughs', Hustvedt's, and Flynn's novels.

The multiple perspectives in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* are further facetted through a Sebaldian incorporation of photographs and the occasional manipulation of the text's layout. While not determined by multiperspectivity, Reif Larsen's *The Selected Works of T.S. Spivet* (2009) – a novel about a twelve-year-old prodigy and gifted cartographer of his family's life on a ranch in Montana – also combines a child narrator on an unusual quest with graphic elements. An example of genuine graphic novels in the renaissance of family fiction is Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home: A Tragicomic* (2006), focusing on the lesbian author's complex relationship with her closeted homosexual father. The subsequent *Are You My Mother? A Comic Drama* (2012) examines the author's relationship to her mother through psychoanalytical interpretations of the author's memories of her emotionally unavailable parent. Yet another example of a 'graphic memoir' focusing on family life and relationships as well as paternal/parental inaccessibility is Carol Tyler's trilogy *You'll Never Know*: *A Good and Decent Man* (2009), *Collateral Damage* (2010), and *Soldier's Heart* (2012), composed to resemble family scrapbooks – collages of photographs, drawings, and handwritten text. As in Hustvedt's *The Sorrows of an American*, *You'll Never Know* portrays the attempt of a grown child to uncover her father's hidden inner life. The stark contrast between the impassable and

enigmatic father figures and the 'transparent' representation of the protagonists' inner lives in terms of narrative perspective and familiarity of form (i.e., realism, family scrapbook) adds significantly to the sincerity effect of the works.

A more common technique in family fiction to achieve multiperspectivity – rather than a juxtaposition of first-person perspectives – consists in the changing focalization of the various family members' perspectives within a third-person narration. A good example from this category is George Hagen's novel *The Laments* (2005). After a tragic accident in the maternity ward, Howard and Julia Lament accept baby Will in exchange for their deceased newborn, and the ensuing narrative follows the protagonist and his new family on their journey from South Africa to Bahrain, Northern Rhodesia, England, and finally to the United States of America. Uprooted every few years, the Laments continue their search for a 'brighter future' until they settle in New Jersey. Because of these frequent changes in location, Jörg Richter cites George Hagen's novel as an example of the 'globalized' family novel. Eugenides' *Middlesex* and its winding journey, from early twentieth-century Anatolia via latter twentieth-century Detroit and San Francisco to contemporary Berlin, is another example from this group. Multiperspectivity in a third-person narrative also determines Adam Langer's family novel *Crossing California* (2004) and the subsequent *Washington Story* (2005), set before the background of the Iran hostage crisis (November 4, 1979 to January 20, 1981) and Harold Washington's period as Chicago's first African-American mayor (1983−1987), respectively. Taken together, the novels follow the intertwined stories of the members of three Jewish-American families from different social and economic backgrounds over a period of eight years. By being set at a specific time in history, Langer's works incorporate a particular socio-political context and cultural atmosphere. In his (auto)biographical novel *My Father's Bonus March* (2009), Langer again interweaves the personal with the historical or political, describing his veteran father's involvement in the Bonus March of 1932 from the first-person per-

spective. Other examples from the group of family novels with a specific historical background are Robinson's *Gilead* and *Home*, set in 1956, on the eve of the African-American Civil Rights Movement. The narrative of Anne Tyler's novel *Digging to America* (2006) interweaves the family life and values of a middle-class WASP family with that of an Iranian immigrant family, each having adopted a baby girl from Korea. By way of orchestrated internal character focalization, Tyler contrasts the family members' expectations and perceptions of shared events, bringing out cultural as well as personal differences and similarities. It is no coincidence that Tyler chooses to portray the differences and similarities between a North American and an Iranian family just five years after 9/11 by making use of literary sincerity: As discussed above, this rhetorical strategy arises during periods of social and cultural conflict, producing sympathy and trust.

Contrasting multiple figural perspectives within a narrative brings out the commonalities and differences between the characters' feelings and intentions. However, this technique of orchestrating character focalizations can also have a contradicting or revealing effect on the narrative itself, evoking the sincerity or insincerity of the narrative rather than the characters. As will be discussed in a subsequent chapter, the narrative unveilings in Franzen's *The Corrections* – whereby subtle narrative obscurities are lifted throughout the text, changing the reader's perspective on earlier instances – evoke an unveiled insight and are part of the rhetorical strategy of literary sincerity. Maile Meloy's novels *Liars and Saints* (2003) and *A Family Daughter* (2006) are very specific examples of this effect, as the unveiling of the narrative's 'truth' is extended to a second publication. Taken by itself, the first text appears to reveal the secrets of a Catholic Canadian-American family from World War II to the present, the greatest of which is a case of incestuous love and procreation. The second text, however, reveals that the first is a novel within a novel: *Liars and Saints* reappears as a semiautobiographical novel within *A Family Daughter* – written by the protagonist of both novels, Abby Santerre –

and causes a scandal in the family. At first, the differences between the texts are subtle and of little consequence to the general narrative, but soon the texts begin to diverge more dramatically, most significantly on the subject of the incestuous affair between the protagonist and her uncle. Both narratives are told from a third-person perspective, with multiperspectivity achieved through shifting internal focalization, producing what appear to be sincere inner views by contrasting seemingly transparent figural minds. This effect is further enhanced in *A Family Daughter* through the unveiling of the first novel within the second, endowing the latter text with narrative sincerity. The story of *A Family Daughter* is set between California, Paris, and Buenos Aires, making it another example of the group of 'globalized' family novels. This particular type of narrative unveiling also takes place between Marilynne Robinson's novels *Gilead*, *Home*, and, most recently, *Lila*: Originally narrated from single perspectives, the novels can be understood to employ this particular type of multiperspectivity between texts when the events of the first novel are retold in the second from the perspective of a different character. This circumstance includes Robinson's *Gilead*, *Home*, and *Lila* in a group of family novels that contains interlinked yet independent 'serial novels'. Other examples include the works of Langer, Bechdel, and Carol Tyler.

As I will further demonstrate in the analysis of two examples of contemporary family fiction, narrative perspective carries particular importance for the family genre in general and for literary sincerity in particular. The purposeful manipulation of the narrative perspective can produce a sense of understanding or recognition as well as of sympathy or even identification that in turn evoke a narrator's or narrative' sincerity. Multiple perspectives in family novels are either organized by chapters and subchapters or shift throughout the narration without clear demarcation. For example, in O'Nan's *Wish You Were Here* each week-day chapter contains a substructure of numbered subchapters, each focalized through a different family member. Taken together, the multiple focalizations give an impression of both contradiction and

resemblance between the characters' perspectives. This fragmenting technique, pioneered in William Faulkner's family novel *As I Lay Dying* (1930), gives formal shape to the dissolution of 'The Family' as well as to the dialectic of family simultaneously maintaining community and fostering the individual (Con Davis 505). Often, the focalization retains a loose organization into chapters or longer paragraphs but continues to shift to varying degrees within this structure. In Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections* (2001) the changes between individual perspectives – both organized by chapters and subtly shifting within the single chapters – produce an effect of ostensible disorder and thereby mirror the family's emotional relationships. The aforementioned narrative unveilings then seem to lift this 'opacity' for the reader. Through the various introspections coming together in a multifaceted view on one particular literary family, multiperspectivity in the contemporary family novel ostensibly offers the reader deep insight into a character ensemble's contradictory feelings and intentions. This seemingly transparent insight into several persons' minds and the supposedly immediate access to their state of feeling are achieved using the rhetorical strategy of sincerity.

As I have demonstrated, family novels can be divided into two groups: those featuring a single perspective and those displaying multiple perspectives. Transverse to this categorization according to perspective, a second encompassing classification can be applied to contemporary family fiction: the aforementioned distinction between family novel and novel of generations. Within these larger, encompassing classifications, a number of smaller divisions can be made along other lines, such as those of setting – local or global, contemporary or historical. A number of recurring elements allow for further subdivisions: the family home; economic and personal loss as well as blessing; child narrators; old age, sickness and death; and – most conspicuously – autobiographical writing. Most, if not all, of these elements can also be understood as tropes of sincerity, and they will reappear in my ensuing analysis, deepening

the relationship between the contemporary family novel and new sincerity. I will treat Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead* as an example of the single perspective in family fiction and Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections* as an example of multiperspectivity. Employing representational strategies of sincerity, these two novels produce characteristic effects of immediacy and transparency (Peyre 312), evoking the congruence between avowal and feeling that Lionel Trilling defines as sincerity. Whereas Robinson revives the eighteenth-century subgenre of the epistolary family novel, thus employing a narrative strategy that pursues effects of intimacy and immediacy, Franzen's novel of psychological realism creates transparency by ostensibly foregoing postmodern forms of 'difficulty' in favor of a foregrounding of narrative accessibility. The two examples can be further located within various subgroups of family fiction: *Gilead* is a generational novel set in the American Midwest with an elderly, dying protagonist cum narrator relating his own and his family's story to his son in a long letter to be read posthumously. Historical events, particularly the abolition movement and the African-American Civil Rights Movement, serve as background to the narrative. *The Corrections* is a family novel with a strong focus on a Midwestern family home and its middle-class materiality. Yet it also incorporates 'globalized' elements, such as Chip Lambert's involvement with a confidence man in post-Soviet Lithuania, Denise Lambert's travels to Eastern Europe for culinary research, and Enid and Alfred Lambert's experience aboard a cruise ship. An elderly, dying patriarch is at the center of the novel here also. Loss and blessing are recurring themes in both Franzen's and Robinson's novels, economical as well as personal, and both novels contain elements of autobiographical writing. Whereas Franzen's novel has been interpreted as autobiographical because of apparent parallels to the author's own family biography (cf. Franzen, "Autobiographical Fiction"), Robinson's novel is a fictional family memoir that practices sincere communication specific to the family. Robinson's generational novel *Gilead* is the subject of analysis in the ensuing chapter.

II "A Desire to Be Understood": Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead*

"To the extent that epistolary fiction survived, the novel of sincerity may be said to have survived."

Leon Guilhamet, *The Sincere Ideal: Studies on Sincerity in Eighteenth-Century English Literature* (1974)

"Letters are the most direct material evidence for the inner life of writers that exists."

Ian Watt, *Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* (1957)

In his article "Whispers of Faith in a Postmodern World" (2013), Gregory Wolfe draws on his experience as an editor of *Image* – "a journal that publishes literature and art concerned with the faith traditions of the West" (n. pag.) – to refute the common critical assumption that "if any patch of our culture can be said to be post-Christian, it is literature" (Paul Elie qtd. in Gregory Wolfe n. pag.). Notably, Wolfe cites Marilynne Robinson among a number of "believing writers" that have been published in *Image* (n. pag). Without a doubt, Christian faith and theology both deeply influence Robinson's literary writing and make it stand out among its 'post-Christian' contemporaries. The religious theme in *Gilead* is evident already from the novel's title: Gilead denominates a region east of the river Jordan referred to in the Bible, particularly in the Book of Genesis. It is ambiguously known in the Old Testament both as a "place of war, bloodshed and iniquity" (Dirda qtd. in Bailey 274) and for the production of a healing salve or balm. Multiple references in the novel to Biblical verses[70] as well as to theological and critical writing concerned with the study – and refutation – of religion[71] testify to

[70] *Gilead* contains references, for example, to the "Book of Leviticus" (157), a book of instructions for the conduct and duties of priests as well as laity; to the "Book of Isaiah" (161); to "Romans 1" (159); to the Biblical figures Hagar and Ishmael (150); to the parable of the prodigal son (in the character of Jack Boughton); and a discussion of the fifth commandment, "Honor your mother and father" (157–61).

[71] The novel contains references, for example, to the theologian Jonathan Edwards, reformer John Calvin, and theologian Karl Barth, and several references to the philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach, who is known for his criticism of Christianity.

the infusion of Robinson's literary work with Christian discourse. Beyond the relevance of religious symbolism, theological argumentation, and Biblical intertextuality for her work, Robinson claims that religious thought is constitutive of the artistic process itself when she professes that "anything written compassionately and perceptively probably satisfies every definition of religious" (qtd. in Fay n. pag.). When the author further replaces the 'belief in God' with a "sense of God" (qtd. in Fay n. pag.) and qualifies worship as "a function of creative, imaginative behavior" (Robinson, "Darwinism" 71), the experience of faith in Robinson's poetics emerges as inseparable from the experience of aesthetic perception and creation.

II.1 "Whispers of Faith in a Postmodern World": Robinson's Creed of Sincerity

Marilynne Robinson grew up in a Presbyterian household but converted to Congregationalism, the dominant denomination of the New England Puritans, as an adult. She presently attends the Congregational United Church of Christ in Iowa City, where she worships regularly and preaches on occasion (cf. Fay). Born in 1943 and raised in the American West (Idaho), Robinson lives in the Midwest (Iowa), where the novelist and essayist teaches creative writing at the University of Iowa Writers' Workshop.[72] She is the author of the novels *Housekeeping* (1980), *Gilead* (2004), *Home* (2009), and *Lila* (2014), the latter three being a loose trilogy; the essay collections *The Death of Adam: Essays on Modern Thought* (1998), *Absence of Mind: The Dispelling of Inwardness from the Modern Myth of the Self* (2010), and *When I Was A Child I Read Books: Essays* (2012); the short story "Connie Bronson"[73] (1986); and *Mother Country: Britain, the Welfare State, and Nuclear Pollution* (1989) – a work of eco-critical non-fiction. Her writing is critically acclaimed and has been awarded several prizes,

[72] Defending America's so-called heartland, Robinson criticizes the preconception of the Midwest as a "non-region" without "culture or history," arguing that its involvement in the abolitionist movement marks it as "a highly distinctive and crucial region" ("McGuffey" 132). The Midwest constitutes the geographical as well as cultural setting of Robinson's literary writing – like it does in the novels of Jonathan Franzen.
[73] Published in *The Paris Review* in 1986.

including the Hemingway Foundation / PEN Award for *Housekeeping* and the Pulitzer Prize for *Gilead*. In a review of Marilynne Robinson's essay collection *When I Was a Child I Used to Read Books* (2012), Susan Salter Reynolds identifies the author as member of a group of writers she refers to as the "New Transcendentalists," a group of religious writers that "builds on the luminous work of Emerson, Thoreau, Dickinson, Whitman, Melville, and others" and is united by a shared "belief in the human spirit and its capacity for community, generosity, and stewardship; in what Whitman called 'radical uniqueness,' and in the vital connection to nature as a source of creativity and innovation" (n. pag.).[74] The Transcendentalist influence on Robinson's writing has also been discerned by early reviewers of her second novel *Gilead* (cf. Wood, "Acts of Devotion") as well as by literary scholars remarking on the poetic quality of her prose (Vander Weele 219). Extended and recurring passages in *Gilead* on the beauty of nature and of human beings, poetic descriptions of ordinary events and objects, and mystic passages on the metaphysic qualities of light and water bring to mind the characteristic spiritual and poetological orientation of Transcendentalism toward nature. Yet the established focus on this quality of Robinson's work neglects another Christian heritage manifest in her writing which is fundamental to her creed of sincerity: the Puritan conversion narrative.

The conversion narrative is a cultural practice whereby one member of a congregation articulates the narrative of their spiritual self-examination – employing the rhetorical strategy of sincerity – for the benefit of the community. By relating *Gilead* to the conversion narrative as well as to the communicational practice of the family memoir – an autobiographical account produced for the benefit of future generations –, I aim to elucidate in the following the prominent place sincerity assumes within the Christian-aesthetic framework of Robinson's novel. I propose *Gilead* (2004) as an example of literary sincerity as well as of the renaissance of family fiction, both in terms of its author's creed of sincerity – manifested in her fiction and artic-

[74] Salter Reynolds names writers Wendell Berry, Thomas Merton, Mary Oliver, and Rebecca Solnit besides Robinson.

ulated in her non-fiction – and in terms of the particular narrative form that shapes this example of a novel of generations, namely epistolary fiction.

Conversion Narratives and Spiritual Autobiographies: Puritan Practices of Literary Sincerity

‘Conversion’ was an integral aspect of life in the New England settlements. Emory Elliott even refers to it as the “essence of Puritan religious life” (52): Each member of the Puritan faith was expected to submit to a ritualized conversion, usually during adolescence, whereby the individual member would withdraw for spiritual self-examination and afterward publicly testify to their successful conversion before the congregation (Wills 55). This practice not only deepened the individual relationship to Christian belief but also strengthened the communal bond. The underlying rhetorical practice, notably, was that of sincerity: a directional communication of an otherwise invisible interiority. This might seem incongruous, as Puritanism is not usually associated with a culture of performed sentiment. Yet in *The Sentimental Puritan: Sympathy, Sincerity, and Community in Early New England* (2010), Abram Van Engen explicates the role of sincerity and sympathy for sociality and community cohesion in Puritan society. He argues that to “better understand America’s vast sentimental culture […] we must study not just a secular philosophy of moral sentiments, but also a Puritan theology of sympathy” (4). He demonstrates that sympathy – a sentiment achieved through practices of sincerity – is at the core of the ideal of Puritan society (cf. Van Engen, “Sympathy”); to support this argument, he cites John Winthrop, who, in *A Model of Christian Charity* (1630), proclaimed that a “sensibleness and sympathy of each other’s conditions will necessarily infuse into each parte a native desire and endeavor, to strengthen, defend, preserve and comfort the other” (Winthrop qtd. in van Engen, “Sympathy” 533). According to Van Engen, social conduct and cohesion in the Puritan New England settlements were maintained through “a language of sympathy” (“Sympathy” 533).

Any 'language of sympathy' – as I have argued above and will further specify later in this chapter – is shaped by the rhetorical strategy of sincerity.[75] In Puritan literature this strategy takes the shape of a willful reduction of rhetorical flourish: so-called plain style or plain speech. Plain, however, does not mean simplistic: "To speak plainly was not primarily to speak simply and not at all to speak artlessly," maintains Larzer Ziff in an essay on the literary consequences of Puritanism (29). Plain style largely omitted figural language as well as rhetoric ornament and instead employed reduced sentence structures as well as everyday language, thereby evoking a seemingly transparent representational form that allowed for seemingly unmediated access to its content. By ostensibly removing rhetorical barriers from sermons, for example, plain style suggested to the Puritan congregation a heightened closeness to God. By further infusing everyday rhetorical practices as well as official discourse with an appearance of truthfulness, plain style fostered sociality through the creation of sympathy – a sense of 'co-feeling' – and trust among fellow Puritans. In this manner, the rhetorical strategy of sincerity in the shape of a 'language of sympathy' worked to strengthen social bonds in a community under immense internal and external pressure, such as the New England settlements (cf. Rosenmeier, Elliott).

The Puritan "theology of sympathy" (van Engen, *Sentimental Puritan* 4) is complemented by a seemingly conflicting value: that of individualism. In *Head and Heart. American Christianities* (2007), historian Garry Wills stresses individualism as "the aspect of Puritan heritage with the deepest impact" and bases his assessment on rigorous Puritan practices of self-reflection in the shape of spiritual self-examination and conversion experiences that gave unprecedented significance to the individual experience (78).[76] However, this constellation of an individualism of introspection and a sociality derived from sympathy achieved through

[75] Abram Van Engen dedicates a whole chapter of *The Sentimental Puritan* to the reading of *The Eliot Tracts* – named after their primary author, missionary John Eliot, and consisting of Native American confessions and sermons – as performances of sincerity (cf. *Sentimental Puritan* 252–98).
[76] Individualism was introduced as a critical term to the analysis of North American culture by Alexis de Tocqueville in *Democracy in America* (*De la Démocratie en Amérique*, 1835 and 1845).

public avowal is not contradictory, but rather integral to practices of sincerity, such as the conversion narrative. As discussed, sincerity as rhetorical practice – the seemingly transparent representation of interiority directed at a counterpart and meant to evoke sympathy and elicit trust – is both focused on the inner self and directed toward an outer other. The interdependence of the individual and the community is further manifest in the self-conception of the Puritan congregation as one body:

> The church represented the body of Christ, with every member such an integral part that if one person were in distress the entire body writhed. Conversely, if the spiritual community were troubled, each individual was afflicted. The spiritual journey of a single soul became a community drama that served as a paradigm for the plight of the congregation just as the well-being of the congregation was reflected in each member. (Elliott 51)

The assumption that the well-being of the community and the well-being of the individual are not only balanced but also mutually interdependent had to be continually reaffirmed through private practices with public significance. It is the Puritan conversion narrative that provides this practice as it employs a rhetoric of sincerity to transform the singular experience into an affirmation of the collective, simultaneously asserting individual faith and social belonging.

In her study *The Puritan Conversion Narrative. The Beginnings of American Expression* (1983), Patricia Caldwell reads the conversion experience not only as foundational to Puritan society but also as the inception of a genuinely North American literary expression. She examines and compares spiritual testimonies given by Puritans in the manner of conversion narratives to attain church membership in both Old and New England as well as personal writings, composed in the manner of spiritual autobiographies and widely circulated in Puritan communities in England and the United States of America. Caldwell asserts a striking difference in feel and tone in North American conversion narratives compared to those of Old England: North American descriptions of spiritual journeys included communal events and opinions to a higher extent than their British counterparts, and they were more likely to conclude

on an optimistic or hopeful note (7). Conversionism, being pervasive in the New England settlements, supplied the "psychological pattern" for early North American literary production, interlinking the individual soul's "journey toward grace and salvation" with the condition of the entire community (Elliott 52). Consequently, spiritual autobiography became a common literary genre in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Often composed in epistolary form, it became a model of self-discovery and religious practice with a distinct didactic purpose (Leise 352). I propose that Marilynne Robinson's epistolary generational novel *Gilead* and its rhetorical strategy of sincerity stand in this Puritan literary tradition.

Gilead is neither devoid of vivid imagery nor of figural language; however, its letter form and focalization of an aging Congregational minister endow it with a stylistic sparseness that could be deemed plain rather than simple. Indeed, James Wood notes that "Robinson's words have a spiritual force that's very rare in contemporary fiction" and claims that it is achieved exactly through a reduction of language, a "Protestant bareness," in the tradition of the plain speech of American Puritanism (Wood, "Acts of Devotion" n. pag.). Composed as an autobiographical letter of confession and counsel from father to son, *Gilead* is reminiscent of the Puritan practices of spiritual self-examination and public testimonial manifested in the conversion narratives and spiritual autobiographies of the period. In the novel, narrator John Ames recalls – in a loosely chronological manner – his childhood and youth, his years as a Congregational minister, and his unexpected, fortunate late fatherhood. Throughout he reflects on his faith, his theological reading, and the challenges and doubts he has faced, such as his older brother's turn to atheism and the loss of his first wife and child. Significantly, Ames' letter does not consider the journey of his soul in isolation. The minister's spiritual autobiography is inseparable from the fate of his family (his father and mother, his grandfather and grandmother, his son, his namesake, and his first and second wives), his congregation, his best friend and his family, and his Midwestern hometown (depicted during the abolition

movement, during both world wars, the Depression, and the emerging African-American Civil Rights Movement). As in the American Puritan tradition of conversion narratives and spiritual autobiographies, the minister’s personal trauma is connected to that of his family and community.

Gilead further resembles a particular subgenre of Puritan spiritual autobiography: that of the autobiographical letter of spiritual instruction addressed to the author’s/narrator’s children (cf. Leise 352–56). In this sense, Robinson’s novel recalls Anne Bradstreet’s letter “To My Dear Children” (1656).[77] Bradstreet opens her short letter, comprised of twenty-one paragraphs, with the following dedication:

> This Book by Any yet vnread,
>
> I leaue for yov when I am dead,
>
> That, being gone, here yov may find
>
> What was yr liueing mothers mind.
>
> Make vse of what I leaue in Loue
>
> And God shall blesse yov from above. (Bradstreet 215)

These lines – introducing the reader to Bradstreet’s letter – share several key elements with Ames’ letter to his son Robert: the direction to be read posthumously (compare “I leaue for yov when I am dead” to “it is my intention for this letter that you will read it then – I’ll have been gone a long time” *Gilead* 1); the attempt at a sincere representation of the parent’s conscious mind, his and her inner life (compare “What was yr liueing mothers mind” to “I do try to write the way I think” 32); the parental counsel (compare “Make vse of what I leaue in Loue” to “to tell you things I would have told you if you had grown up with me” 157); and the asking of God’s blessing for the offspring (compare “And God shall blesse yov from

[77] Besides Bradstreet’s letter, Leise cites two more Puritan examples of the subgenre: Thomas Shepard’s autobiography and, to a lesser extent, also Cotton Mather’s unpublished *Paterna*.

above" to "I'll pray that you grow up a brave man in a brave country. I will pray you find a way to be useful" 291). Of particular interest, however, is the opening line of Bradstreet's "To My Dear Children" – "This Book by Any yet vnread" – because it suggests the exclusive and private quality of the epistolary. Its author, however, was both North America's first published poet and first published female author. It is therefore unlikely that when composing "To My Dear Children" in 1656 – six years after the successful publication of her poetry collection *The Tenth Muse Lately Sprung Up in America* (1650) – Bradstreet would not have been considering publication of the work. Bradstreet's work evidently operates on the threshold between the private and the public – characteristic of any practice of sincerity. She employs a seemingly private form to endow her participation in a public discourse with credibility. Leise therefore claims that Bradstreet's letter is "as much about the self as [...] [it is] about the community" (356) – a statement also accurate for the practice of sincerity. The seemingly private piece of autobiographical communication from mother to children emerges as a public pamphlet of social conduct and, further, sets an example for imitation. Robinson's *Gilead*, albeit a fictional version of this subgenre of the spiritual autobiography, participates in this specific familial form of intergenerational communication.

"Endless Letter": Intergenerational Community

In 1771, more than a century after the publication of Anne Bradstreet's spiritual autobiography in letter form, "To My Dear Children," Benjamin Franklin began to work on what has posthumously become known as *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*. After a troubled publication history (cf. Labaree), this work has since become arguably the most influential North American autobiography per se, and it is a prominent example of a common practice of familial and intergenerational discourse. Notably, Franklin, like Bradstreet, frames his life story as a letter to his son William:

> Dear Son: I have ever had a Pleasure in obtaining any little Anecdotes of my Ancestors. You may remember the Enquiries I made among the Remains of my Relations when you were with me in England; and the Journey I took for that purpose. Now imagining it may be equally agreeable to you to know the Circumstances of my Life, many of which you are yet unacquainted with; and expecting a Week's uninterrupted Leisure in my present Country Retirement, I sit down to write them for you. (43)

In the first part of the work, Franklin goes on to trace his genealogy, describe the relationship to his family, particularly his older brother and delineate his early career as a printer. The following three parts focus on Franklin's attempts at self-improvement, his entrepreneurial career, as well as his social and political involvement (cf. Douglas Anderson). On the surface, the *Autobiography* appears to present intimate communication between father and son, meant perhaps to rekindle the relationship between the two estranged men.[78] However, by the mid-eighteenth century, the epistolary form was already an established rhetorical convention of public discourse and Franklin an established figure of public life. The letter form of the *Autobiography* was therefore a thinly disguised rhetorical strategy for Franklin's personal and political justification on the eve of the American Revolution. The "illusion of private disclosure in a public medium" (Douglas Anderson 2) thereby served to elicit the reader's sympathy and trust in the author's/narrator's discourse, employing the rhetorical strategy of sincerity.

Although Anne Bradstreet's and Benjamin Franklin's autobiographical letters are clearly pieces of public communication veiled as private ones for reasons of rhetorical effect, they are nonetheless associated with the literary genre of personal history. Personal histories are defined as autobiographies written, usually by laymen, for a limited audience of family and friends. This relatively private audience, however, is expected to grow with the addition of future generations to the family. In the introduction to their guide book *To Our Children's Children: Preserving Family Histories for Generations to Come* (1993), Bob Greene and D.G. Fulford describe personal histories as "a lasting and beautiful hand-me-down for your children, your children's children, and generations that will come along far in the future" (1).

[78] For a discussion of the personal politics of *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, see Shurr.

The creation of personal family histories has become such a popular cultural practice that a great number of services exist to support amateur autobiographers: guidebooks, websites, and computer programs offer instruction as well as ghostwriting and editing services. The explicit advice of these service-providers is to focus on the private rather than the public circumstances of the autobiographer's life: "The main thing for you to know is that you need not attempt to sum up your life in grand, sweeping historic strokes, but stick to the seemingly small basics" (Greene and Fulford 2). The objectives of personal histories, as they emerge from the instructions given by the guidebooks, are two-fold. The first is to secure the author's personal legacy: "Writing your life story is also a wonderful gift for your family, your children, your friends and loved ones. They learn more about you, your experience, what life has taught you and the lessons that can mean so much to them for their personal journeys" (Gilbert n. pag.). The second is a result of the first, namely to establish continuity between generations: "Creating a memoir is a great way to connect generations and preserve memories" (Association of Personal Historians n. pag.). Personal histories, directed at a specific audience with the explicit wish to communicate, are subject to the rhetorical strategy of sincerity and articulations of a cultural need for the assurance of community by way of what Robinson calls "imaginative love" ("Imagination" 21). Community is thus established by facilitating comprehension of the preceding generations' intentions and feelings – a 'distant sympathy', as it were. Incidentally, the underlying "desire to be understood" that determines the genre of personal history can also be ascribed to the characters of Robinson's generational novel *Gilead* (Bailey 278). The concept of 'imaginative love' is at the heart of Marilynne Robinson's credo of sincerity and I will return to it at the end of this chapter.

Gilead is composed in the literary tradition of both the private-yet-public parental letter of confession and counsel, and the autobiographical genre of personal history. Set in 1956, the Gilead of the novel's title, a fictional Midwestern town in Iowa, provides the background for

a family history spanning four generations. The protagonist and first-person narrator of the novel, 76-year-old Congregational minister John Ames, suffers from terminal angina pectoris. He writes what he calls an “endless letter” (*Gilead* 46) to his young son Robert “Robbie” Ames, to be read posthumously, in which he gives an account of his family’s genealogy as well as his own life and opinions:

> Your mother told you I’m writing your begats, and you seemed very pleased with the idea. Well, then. What should I record for you? I, John Ames, was born in the year of the lord 1880 in the state of Kansas, the son of John Ames and Martha Turner Ames, grandson of John Ames and Margaret Todd Ames. At this writing I have lived seventy-six years, seventy four of them here in Gilead, Iowa, excepting study at the college and seminary. And what else should I tell you? (8)

Alluding to the genealogical lists of the Old Testament, Ames here refers to the letter to his seven-year-old son as his “begats”. Such a designation befits the genealogy of a minister who stems from a family of preachers: “My mother’s father was a preacher, and my father’s father was, too, and his father before him, and before that, nobody knows, but I wouldn’t hesitate to guess” (5). Assuming the narrative form of a letter from father to son and accounting for four generations of Ames men and – to lesser extent – women, *Gilead* is a generational novel in terms of its character ensemble as well as its perspective.

The key points of Ames’ genealogy are established within the first pages of the novel and developed as the text progresses: Ames’ son Robert is addressed directly and the boy’s mother – Ames’ second and significantly younger wife Lila – alluded to already on the first page: “I told you you might have a very different life from mine, and from the life you’ve had with me, and that would be a wonderful thing, there are many ways to live a good life. And you said, Mama already told me that” (1). Ames’ father, also named John Ames, a pacifist minister who disapproved of his own father’s active service in the Civil War, is introduced early on as having “died an old man” (2). Finally, grandfather John Ames – the fourth Ames man, a revivalist preacher, active abolitionist, and Union Army chaplain – is said to have been “born

in Maine and had come out to Kansas in the 1830s" (9) to "make himself useful to the cause of abolition" (57).[79] This genealogy of ministers and their progeny – all bearing the name John Ames – has led James Wood to remark that "Gilead is much concerned with fathers and sons, and with God the father and his son" ("Acts of Devotion" n. pag.). John "Jack" Ames Boughton, the protagonist's namesake and his life-long friend Robert Boughton's prodigal son, is yet another John Ames in the novel. Ames' own son Robbie was also named after this Robert Boughton. The shared name "John Ames" suggests genealogical and historical continuity as well as intergenerational connection. Even so, a dominant theme of the novel is intergenerational conflict: between Ames' father, the pacifist minister, and Ames' grandfather, the Union Army Chaplain; between Ames and his father ("God rest his soul, I know for a fact I disappointed him," *Gilead* 6); between Ames and his godson Jack;[80] and finally, in anticipation, between Ames and his son Robbie. The 'endless letter' is meant to foster intergenerational understanding beyond potential conflict and to build a familial community spanning four generations. Ames himself had once received such a letter from his father, too, further establishing it as a particular practice of familial communication, whether successful or not: "When my father was old he told me that very thing in a letter he sent me. Which, as it happens, I burned" (5).

Whereas the family relationships in Robinson's novels are often less than ideal, family emerges from her essayistic work as a utopian form of social organization. In the essay "Fam-

[79] Grandfather Ames is portrayed as an activist in the abolitionist movement, having personally known the abolitionists Jon Brown and James Henry Lane, also known as Jim Lane (*Gilead* 54), and having belonged to a group of radical clergy that attended Lane Theological Seminary and Oberlin College in the 1830s (58). For a history of the role of Kansas in the abolitionist movement, see Filler, particularly Chapter 10.

[80] Jack's return to Gilead serves as a catalyst to the narrative, and the 'endless letter' chronicles Ames' struggle to overcome his distrust and to finally forgive and accept his namesake. Ames' virtuousness and his personal tragedies are inverted in Jack's disreputable life related through Ames' narration (such as the denial and death of the younger man's illegitimate daughter). Jack Boughton's story is gradually revealed throughout the novel: Ames initially suggests in his letter that his old friend Reverend Robert Boughton is in some way troubled (*Gilead* 76, 82, 84, 101-2) and then gestures at an unpleasant story concerning Boughton's son Jack (142–43), calling the events in question "the old catastrophe" (174) before recalling the events of the tragic death of Jack Boughton's illegitimate child in detail (184–89).

ily" (1996), she both gives an open definition of the social form[81] – surpassing any biological or legal boundaries – and insists on the historical and social constructedness of the institution.[82] Yet, according to Robinson, the demystification and denaturalization of 'The Family' does not diminish the inevitability of this social form for the creation of individual and communal identity: "Family is a narrative of love and comfort which corresponds to nothing in the world but which has formed behavior and expectation" ("Family" 91); "[o]ne acquires a culture from within a culture – for all purposes, from the family" (98). Family is identified here as a formative cultural narrative, formative of both the individual and larger social order, while not reflective of an empirical reality ("corresponds to nothing in the world"). Robinson further develops this notion of the family as an instrument of both self-constitution and community building as distinctly utopian:

> Why do we never imagine that the happiness he [Thomas Jefferson] mentioned might include a long supper with our children, a long talk with a friend, a long evening with a book? Given time, and certain fading habits and expectations, we could have comforts and luxuries for which no one need be deprived. We could nurture our families, sustain our heritages, and, in the pregnant old phrase, enjoy ourselves. The self, that dear and brief acquaintance, we could entertain with a little of the ceremony it deserves. ("Family" 106–07)

Family is depicted as a social form that maintains a satisfactory relationship ("for which no one need be deprived") between the self ("that dear and brief acquaintance") and community ("ourselves"). While her essay develops the utopian potential of family as a narrative governing the social behavior of the individual toward the community and vice versa, Robinson's

[81] "[O]ne's family are those toward whom one feels loyalty and obligation, and/or from whom one derives identity, and/or to whom one gives identity, and/or with whom one shares habits, tastes, stories, customs, memories. This definition allows for families of circumstance and affinity as well as kinship, and it allows for the existence of people who are incapable of family, though they may have parents and siblings and spouses and children" (Robinson, "Family" 87).

[82] "The family as we know it in the modern West has been largely willed and reformed into existence. […] The case has been made that childhood was invented, which it was, at least in the sense that certain societies began to feel that young children should be excluded from the workforce, and women with them, to some extent at least" (Robinson, "Family" 93).

novels also explore its oppressive dimensions: *Housekeeping*,[83] *Gilead*,[84] and *Home*[85] portray the individual to be under constant threat from a norm maintained though the same narrative of family life. This duality in Robinson's work of hope and its deferral, of charity and the fall from grace, is well summarized in Ames' final thoughts on his life: "This whole town does look like whatever hope becomes after it begins to weary a little, then weary a little more. But hope deferred is still hope" (291). This unresolved tension between hope and its deferral shapes the moral appeal of Robinson's essayistic and literary work.[86]

"Imaginative Love": Robinson's Theory of Sociality

In both her fiction and non-fiction, where she "passionately engages public policy as well as philosophical and theological scholarship" (Fay n. pag.), Robinson returns to the classical tenets of Christianity found in Augustine, Chrysostomos, and Martin Luther, and especially to those found in John Calvin and Jonathan Edwards (cf. Robinson, "Credo"). Her attempts at a

[83] In Robinson's first novel *Housekeeping*, encompassing three generations of women, the homodiegetic narrator Ruth and her aunt Sylvie – a woman voluntarily living on the fringe of society and of social convention – ultimately choose a life as nomads, fleeing from the state that threatens to separate the girl from her 'unfit' guardian. *Housekeeping* has been widely read in terms of gender criticism, often focusing on the 'subversive' qualities of the narrative.

[84] While Ames' narrative "culminates in transcendence" (Bailey 279), his namesake John "Jack" Ames Boughton's story does not. Whereas the abolition movement serves as an ostensive historical context to the novel's narrative past, the African-American Civil Rights Movement constitutes the context for the narrative present (cf. Bailey, Douglas). Once a station on the Underground Railroad that helped African Americans from slave-holding states make their passage into the North in the mid-nineteenth century, the all-white Gilead of 1956 is unfit as a haven for Jack's utopian mixed-race family. The healing balm alluded to in the novel's title – as promised in the title of the African-American spiritual "There Is A Balm in Gilead" (Bailey 274) – is thus withheld from Jack. Hence, while the novel's historical context ostensibly incurs the history of abolition in the American Midwest through the figure of grandfather Ames, *Gilead* reveals, in the terms of Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992), an Africanist presence that circumscribes Ames' final moment of utopian transcendence. This tension between the *ideal* of a Christian community – as when the town communally rebuilds a church that had been struck by lightning (*Gilead* 110-112, 120) – and the *reality* of this community – as when Ames reports in passing that its African-American population has left the town of Gilead after a case of arson in the 'Negro church' (41) – is purposefully not resolved within the novel.

[85] In *Home* – the second tome to the loose trilogy of *Gilead*, *Home*, and *Lila* – Jack's suffering becomes more pronounced. This second novel is set at the same time as the first but written in the third person and largely from the perspective of Glory Boughton (Ames' neighbor and life-long friend Robert Boughton's daughter) and focuses on Ames' namesake John 'Jack' Ames Boughton's story.

[86] It is likely due to this moral appeal that *Gilead* has been named one of former President Barrack Obama's favorite novels.

'rehabilitation'[87] of Christian faith take into account "what is beautiful" in these classical works of theology, without omitting "their errors" ("Credo" 28). Yet, Robinson is not exactly a classical theologian: "As I have said," the author professes in her credo, a statement of faith traditionally made by figures of authority to establish standards of religious orthodoxy, "I am not of the school of thought that finds adherence to doctrine synonymous with firmness of faith. On the contrary, I believe that faith in God is a liberation of thought, because thought is an ongoing instruction in things that pertain to God" (26–27). For this reason – and because of the aesthetic approach to religious experience manifested in *Gilead* – her literary work can be read as a liberal reaction to the resurgence of Christian fundamentalism and evangelical conservatism.

Robinson, a self-professed Christian Liberal in principle, regrets what she sees as the end of American Liberalism and criticizes the "Religious Right" (the so-called Creationists) as well as the "Irreligious Right" (the so-called Darwinists) as sharing in the same political and economic principles of "utter asociality" ("Darwinism" 58). On a similar note, she criticizes the "present dominance of aspersion and ridicule in American public life" as an asocial "reflex" ("Tyranny" 262). Her dismissal of a culture marked by ironic detachment recalls Roger Rosenblatt's afore-cited post-9/11 hope for an end of the 'age of irony', as well as other admissions of a deep dissatisfaction with irony as the dominant cultural principle at the turn of the millennium (cf. Purdy, Wallace). Drawing on her experience as an instructor at the University of Iowa Writers' Workshop, Robinson further points to a discrepancy between the common characterization of the contemporary period as 'the age of cynicism' and her professional experience with young writers who seek alternatives to the prevalent rhetorical mode of irony (qtd. in Hoezee n. pag.). For her, it is religious experience that is able to overcome the

[87] Throughout her non-fiction, and arguably also in her literary work (cf. Hesselink), the author aims to 'rehabilitate' John Calvin – a disputed theologian of the Protestant Reformation in Europe and the Puritan settlements in the 'New World' – as a Renaissance Humanist.

prevalent ironic detachment because it combines individual with communal experience: "Religion has the distinction of being the most intensely private and individual and at the same time the most nearly universal of human experiences" ("Credo" 28). Yet, individual experience cannot be recognized by the community as shared experience without rhetorical mediation. It is in need of a representational practice that will render these "deeply interior encounters with the inexpressible" (Robinson, "Credo" 29) familiar to the community: According to Robinson, this practice of making visible and forming connections is manifested in the religious arts. Sincerity as a central element of Robinson's poetics is indicated by her dismissal of irony – a common antonym to sincerity – and, more so, is evident from Robinson's proposition that the religious arts strive to render an otherwise inexpressible innermost experience intelligible to a particular community: "The art, music, and literature of Christendom have been very largely driven by the hope of expressing some part of that weight of meaning" ("Credo" 29).

Marilynne Robinson's previously cited claim that literature fosters communities through an "exercise in the capacity for imaginative love" ("Imagination" 21) recalls Van Engen's claim that the "fellow feeling" characteristic for the Puritan ideal of sociality also determined Puritan rhetorical practices, facilitating an indirect mediation of conflicts within the strained Puritan community ("Sympathy" 533).[88] Exactly how sociality is maintained through the literary arts is the subject of Robinson's essay "Imagination and Community" (2012).[89] Here, Robinson argues that literature, by simulating ordinary human experience that readers can identify with, produces a "presence in absence" that serves as the foundation to communal bonds among members of a group too large for personal social interaction (20):

[88] For an introduction to the social, religious, and political conflicts underlying Puritan writing as well as their retroactive romantization, see Elliott.
[89] The essay's argument and its title recall Benedict Anderson's study *Imagined Communities* (1983) and his theory that all extended communities are imaginary in so far as not all their members can know each other personally and that the imaginative relationships are maintained discursively.

> I would say, for the moment, that community, at least community larger than the immediate family, consists very largely of imaginative love for the people we do not know or whom we know very slightly. […] I think fiction may be, whatever else, an exercise in the capacity for imaginative love, or sympathy, or identification. (21)

Robinson thus proposes that community is maintained, and even formed, primarily through efforts of the imagination, particularly those of writers and readers. Communal bonds are thereby upheld by what she calls “imaginative love, or sympathy”. This proposition echoes the moral philosopher Adam Smith’s conception, as developed in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), that sympathy guarantees social cohesion and that it is achieved primarily through acts of the imagination:

> Of this kind is pity or compassion, the emotion which we feel for the misery of others, when we either see it, or *are made to conceive it in a very lively manner*. That we often derive sorrow from the sorrow of others, is a matter of fact too obvious to require any instances to prove it; for this sentiment, like all the other original passions of human nature, is by no means confined to the virtuous and humane, though they perhaps may feel it with the most exquisite sensibility. […] As we have no immediate experience of what other men feel, we can form no idea of the manner in which they are affected, but by conceiving what we ourselves should feel in the like situation. Though our brother is upon the rack, as long as we ourselves are at our ease, our senses will never inform us of what he suffers. They never did, and never can, carry us beyond our own person, *and it is by the imagination only that we can form any conception of what are his sensations*. Neither can that faculty help us to this any other way, than by representing to us what would be our own, if we were in his case. It is the impressions of our own senses only, not those of his, which our imaginations copy. By the imagination we place ourselves in his situation, we conceive ourselves enduring all the same torments, we enter as it were into his body, and *become in some measure the same person* with him, and thence form some idea of his sensations, and even feel something which, though weaker in degree, is not altogether unlike them. (Smith 1–2, emphasis added)

What emerges from this extended passage is that, because one has no “immediate” access to another individual’s emotional state, sympathy has to be evoked through a “lively” representation of feeling by the sender, while the receiver simultaneously employs their “imagination” to “copy” this feeling from their own sensual experience. This process then allows the receiver to identify with the sender and therefore experience sympathy – a “fellow feeling” (Van Engen, “Sympathy” 533) – for him or her. The making visible and intelligible of an otherwise

inaccessible emotional experience for reception by a particular audience is an example of the practice of sincerity. As sympathy is generated by the rhetorical practice of sincerity, Robinson's conception of sociality maintained by what the author calls "imaginative love" is based on a social participation in literary sincerity.

Although Marilynne Robinson suggestively lists "good faith" – a synonym of sincerity – among the values she regrets to have been lost ("Family" 106),[90] the author does not explicitly declare to be adhering to a rhetoric of sincerity in her writing. Rather, as discussed above, her work is located within an epistemological framework founded on premises and practices of sincerity that are rooted in Puritan practices of introspection (for the sake of private self-improvement) and public testimony (for the sake of a social bond based on sympathy). In *Gilead*, Robinson posits practices of sincere communication based on sympathy as a means to create and maintain familial and particularly intergenerational connection and community: Ames writes his 'endless letter' to make himself posthumously known to his son and the novel's hopeful social impetus – its invitation to practice "imaginative love" – is contained in what Lisa M. Siefker Bailey calls the characters' "desire to be understood" (278). After having delineated the contextual level, the following chapter will now elicit how literary sincerity operates on the textual level of Robinson's novel *Gilead*.

[90] "It seems to me that something has passed out of the culture, changing it invisibly and absolutely. Suddenly it seems there are too few uses for words like humor, pleasure, and charm; courage, dignity, and graciousness; learnedness, fair-mindedness, openhandedness; loyalty, respect, and good faith" (Robinson, "Family" 106).

II.2 Crafted Immediacy: Literary Sincerity in *Gilead*

II.2.1 “An Experiment with Candor”: *Gilead*’s Narrative Form

The narrative perspective in *Gilead* is established early on as both familial and epistolary. The first sentence of the novel introduces the first-person narrative perspective and, further, as addressed to a specific recipient: “I told you last night that I might be gone sometime, and you said, Where, and I said, To be with the Good Lord, and you said, Why, and I said, Because I’m old, and you said, I don’t think you’re old” (1). The narrator / fictional author of the fictional letter, 76-year-old minster John Ames, and the fictional reader, his son Robbie, are subsequently identified as father and son: “And you said, Mama already told me that” (1). The communicative situation is soon revealed as that of a letter: “If you’re a grown man when you read this – it is my intention for this letter that you will read it then – I’ll have been gone a long time” (1). The genre of the text is thus established outright as an epistolary family novel. In an article on the history of the family novel, Mark Anderson classifies Samuel Richardson’s epistolary novel *Pamela* as a proponent of the family genre – not so much in terms of its plot and character constellation as in terms of its narrative situation (25–26). According to Anderson, the genre is determined not just by the family subject but also by family relations expressed in narrative form: “‘Family’ equals ‘familiarity’” (26, my translation). As the addendum to the title *In a Series of Familiar Letters from a Beautiful Young Damsel, To her Parents* suggests, Richardson’s novel consists of intimate letters from the house servant Pamela to her parents in her native village. The narrative perspective of the novel is therefore one of intimate familiarity: “[T]he reader of these familiar letters assumes the position of the parents, a position as it were in the bosom of the family: The ‘act of reading’ itself requires a family perspective” (Mark Anderson 25–26, my translation). Because the letter form, according to Anderson, can also render the letter-writing consciousness in a manner which the read-

er experiences as intimate insight into the mind of the narrator, the perspective of the epistolary can be simultaneously that of the addressee and that of the author of the letter, truly placing the recipient within the 'bosom of the family'.

Another element established within the first few pages of the novel – both in claim and practice – is the novel's tone of sincerity. Reflecting on the purpose of his letter and the impression it will make on its intended reader, Ames announces his intention to practice sincerity in the writing of his personal history: "I believe I'll make an experiment with candor here" (5). As discussed above, James Wood emphasizes the relationship between the "spiritual force" of *Gilead* and the "Protestant bareness" of its language ("Acts of Devotion" n. pag.). As I have argued in the previous chapters, an artful reduction of language results in an ostensible transparency of the representational form and the seeming unmediated nature of the thoughts and feelings rendered, and this can be employed to evoke the sincerity of the narrator, of the implied author, and of the text itself. In *Gilead*, Robinson combines the register of familial letter-writing and autobiographical narration with simplicity of grammatical structure:

> When I was twelve years old, my father took me to the grave of my grandfather. At that time my family had been living in Gilead for about ten years. My father, who was born in Maine and had come out to Kansas in the 1830s, lived with us for a number of years after his retirement. Then the old man ran off to become a sort of itinerant preacher, or so we believed. He died in Kansas and was buried there, near a town that had pretty well lost its people. (9)

At times, for example, in the passage quoted in the previous paragraph, the narrator's discourse also imitates oral speech, and particularly that of children, without the use of quotation marks, contributing to the effect of rhetoric simplicity. A third technique that contributes to the general impression of 'bareness' in the novel is the juxtaposition of spiritual with mundane observations (Vander Weele 219 and 227). One example of such juxtaposition in the novel is the episode of the baptized kitten litter:

> We were pious children from pious households in a fairly pious town, and this affected our behavior considerably. Once, we baptized a litter of cats. […] I myself moistened their brows, repeating the full Trinitarian formula. Their grim old crooked-tailed mother found us baptizing away by the creek and began carrying her babies off by the napes of their necks, one and then another. We lost track of which was which, but we were fairly sure that some of the creatures had been borne away still in the darkness of paganism, and that worried us a great deal. (24)

Wood and other literary critics and scholars have remarked on the resulting “gentle” humor of the novel (“Acts of Devotion” n. pag.). The effect is one of an apparent spiritual simplicity and openness that also evokes sincerity.

In addition to the first-person perspective of the epistolary and the ‘Protestant bareness’ of its grammatical structure and style, Marilynne Robinson’s novel further evokes an intimate insight into the protagonist’s mind by taking the form of an internal monologue: The narrative’s logic is associative, passages recall each other in a form several critics refer to as that of a spiral (Bailey 265, Vander Weele 227). This means that the internal monologue is repetitive, returning to the same memories, repeating and/or expanding them: for example, memories of the search for the grave of grandfather Ames (*Gilead* 9–18, 55–56, 58, 88, 100, 102, 248), of the communal rebuilding of a burned-down church in the pouring rain after a period of drought (110–112, 120, 134, 175), and of Robert’s mother and Ames’ second wife Lila’s arrival in the town of Gilead on Pentecost (190–191, 219–220, 240–241, 289). Significantly, this narrative pattern imitates the repetitive and circular order of thought and creates a literary representation of consciousness, thereby evoking an intimate insight into John Ames’ mind.

“Short-Cut to the Heart”: The Epistolary Form as Pretension of Authenticity

The epistolary form is often assumed to offer an intimate insight into the letter writer’s mind (cf. Bray). Ruth Perry, in her study *Women, Letters, and the Novel* (1980), claims letter-novels to be “uncensored streams of consciousness,” in which “thoughts are seemingly written down as they come, without effort to control their logic or structure” (qtd. in Bray 9 and

1). In *The Rise of the Novel* (1957), Ian Watt maintains that "letters are the most direct material evidence for the inner life of their writers that exists," a "short-cut, as it were, to the heart," and "may pass for the spontaneous transcription of the subjective reaction of the protagonist to the events as they occur" (195). Not least, Mikhail Bakhtin, in "Discourse in the Novel" (1934–1935), observes that the letter form leads the novel into "the depth of everyday life, its smallest details, to intimate relations between people and into the internal life of the individual person" (qtd. in Bray 8). The common emphasis in these statements is on the seemingly uncensored access granted via the spontaneous form of the epistolary novel to the inner life of its fictional author. In this manner, the epistolary assumes an appearance of authentic expression: Appearing "uncensored" and "without […] control," "spontaneous," and "intimate," the letter claims to be authentic, while in fact its rhetorical strategy is that of sincerity, meaning censored, controlled, deliberate, and public. As discussed above, articulations of sincerity need to veil their crafted character, they need to appear authentic to maintain credibility. Yet, the letter form shares with the rhetoric of sincerity its intentionality and audience accommodation when communicating states of feeling. Thus the narrative form of the epistolary bears particular significance for the rhetoric strategy of sincerity in general and the literary sincerity of Marilynne Robinson's generational novel *Gilead* in particular.

The epistolary novel's seeming authenticity is based on an ostensible immediacy. This immediacy is a rhetorical effect, a crafted aesthetic illusion.[91] The mere premise of a fictional, written letter necessarily precludes the illusion of unmediated access to figural thoughts, as it is mediated through writing. In a study of the fiction of letters, Mary Favret asserts that "we accept too readily the notion that the letter allows us a window into the intimate […] self" (10). Next, I will demonstrate that, while *Gilead* does offer a "window into the intimate self"

[91] I employ the phrase 'aesthetic illusion' cautiously because – as I have argued in the introductory chapter – any communication of self and inner life is necessarily dependent on rhetorical mediation and therefore always an illusion in the sense of never being unmediated.

of John Ames, what can be seen through this window is neither uncensored nor the result of spontaneous transcription, but rather an example of the rhetorical strategy of sincerity. The apparent immediacy of the epistolary genre – as well as that of the non-fictional letter – is evoked mainly through two narrative strategies: the seeming spontaneity of the narrative (temporal immediacy) and the seeming transparency of the narrative (spatial immediacy). What I refer to as 'temporal immediacy' in the epistolary novel suggests that the narrated event has taken place very recently or is taking place at the time of its narration, whereas spatial immediacy suggests that the objects of the narrative (its characters or materiality) can be seemingly perceived at close proximity and without representational barriers. Notably, the narrator of an epistolary novel often self-reflects on these narrative strategies of immediacy in a metafictional gesture (Miller, *Trust* 108): In Richardson's *Clarissa*, the heroine of the same name explains that "however 'easy and familiar' letters may seem 'they must have that advantage from sitting down to write them which prompt speech could not always have'" (qtd. in Bray 58). Likewise, in *Gilead* Ames contemplates the discrepancy between written, spoken, and thought discourse: "I don't write the way I speak, I'm afraid you would think I didn't know any better. […] I do try to write the way I think. But of course that all changes as soon as I put it into words" (32). Whereas Richardson's narrator stresses the aesthetic advantage of the shaped form over "prompt speech," Robinson's narrator focuses on the divergence between thought and its transcription, with the result that both Clarissa and Ames expose the immediacy of the letter form as *crafted*.

"Writing to the Moment": Evoking Epistolary Presentness and Temporal Immediacy

As discussed above, a literary genre is characterized by a number of traits, shared to a varying extent by its proponents. However, genre is not a rigid set of traits, but a number of possible combinations of characteristics that raise specific expectations in the reader as to the text's

form and content, its premise, progress, and ending. This is true for the family novel as well as the letter novel. Possible combinations of characteristic traits in the epistolary novel include the number of letters and letter writers it contains, whether it encompasses the entire correspondence or fragments of it, and the inclusion of similar text types, such as the journal or divergent text types, such as third-person-narrated passages (Bray 28). *Gilead* is composed as one long letter from father to son. It is episodic in structure, with events taking place in the narrative present as well as the recent and distant past. These events are presented in an associative rather than chronological manner. Although episodic in character, the letter is not presented as a fragment, but as having an explicit beginning and end. At times, Ames' 'endless letter' appears closer to a diary or even sermon (Bailey 265). This is true particularly for sections of the letter where its fictional author considers his imminent death ("No sleep this night. My heart is greatly disquieted. It is a strange thing to feel illness and grief in the same organ. There is no telling one from the other" 212) or recalls events from his youth ("My father brought me some biscuit that had soot on it from his hands. 'Never mind,' he said, 'there's nothing cleaner than ash'. But it affected the taste of that biscuit, which I thought might resemble the bread of affliction […]" 111). Yet, because the fictional reader of the novel, Robert "Robbie" Ames, is frequently addressed as 'you' throughout the narrative, the communicative situation of an epistolary is maintained.

Regardless of the malleability of certain constellations of genre traits in the epistolary, two features of the letter novel stand out: the first-person narrator and fictional author of the letter and the genre's characteristic presentness. The artful combination of these two formal dimensions is principally accountable for the seeming immediacy of letter novels. Samuel Richardson called the method which he pioneered "writing to the moment" (qtd. in McKillop 36). The first-person narrator – understood to be the fictional author and combined with a direct address to the fictional reader – is essentially unavoidable in the communicative situation of a

letter. This, however, is not entirely the case for the present tense: What Richardson referred to as a "present-tense *manner*" in the letter-novel depends on a shaping of the narrative form that goes beyond the employment of a grammatical tense (Rudnik-Smalbraak 16, emphasis added). Discussing the letter novel's characteristic presentness, Janet Altman states that, although the present tense may be the dominant mode of time in the epistolary, the present moment remains "unseizable, and its unseizability haunts epistolary language" (129). "Epistolary discourse," she therefore argues, "is the language of the 'as if' present" (140). The literary effect of an 'as if present' – the temporal immediacy of epistolary novels – depends on the repetition of its literary markers. Beyond the use of the present tense, presentness is evoked in Richardson's letter novels through the repeated use of particular stylistic devices, such as elliptical and verbless sentences, "visually significant minutiae" (e.g. dashes, exclamation marks, italics, and ornaments), and temporal deictic markers (e.g. 'now', 'not yet', 'this moment') (Rudnik-Smalbraak 16; cf. Bray 55). Deictic markers in particular can convey an impression not only of presentness but also of being rooted in a particular consciousness (cf. Fludernik), thereby evoking the sincere 'window into the intimate self'.[92] The resulting 'as if present' endows the letter novel with an illusion of spontaneity, of uncontrolled expression, and thus of authenticity, which is in fact the result of the rhetorical strategy of sincerity: a crafted immediacy.

In *Gilead*, temporal deictic markers appear occasionally ("Just *now* I was listening to a song on the radio" 58, emphasis added; "I'll pray, and *then* I'll sleep" 291, emphasis added),

[92] In the fourth chapter of her linguistic study *The Fictions of Language and the Languages of Fiction* (1993), Monica Fludernik analyses deictic features and their "expressivity". She differentiates between 'adverbial deixis' (such as temporal and spatial deixis), pragmatic categories of expressivity (such as typographical signals of expressivity and direct address) and syntactic expressions of subjectivity (such as exclamations, interjections, and sentence modifiers): "Such expressivity – in the narrative text – is interpreted as signaling the deictic center of a character. The presence of these expressive elements in free indirect discourse has therefore been largely responsible for the traditional dual voice interpretation of free indirect discourse, in which the 'voice' of the narrator (signaled by referential and temporal 'government') and that of the character (the character's deictic center as instanced in the many expressive devices) intermingle in free indirect style" (227). I will examine this 'duality' of voice in *Gilead* in the following subsection.

and, while there are no visual markers of presentness in *Gilead*, there is the rare use of paragraph breaks to signal both a passing of time and an acute present ("I believe I will just step outside and see what he has on his mind. I know there is something. [paragraph break] He wanted to know if I would be in my study at church tomorrow. I said in the morning, yes. So he will come by to talk with me" 195). More frequently, a suggested overlap between epistolary present and narrated event that occur in descriptions of the narrator's surroundings presented in the present tense ("You and the cat have joined me in my study. Soapy is on my lap and you are on your belly on the floor […]" 63; "You and Tobias are hopping around the sprinkler […]" 73). The above moments endow the epistolary with its characteristic temporal immediacy. However, such instances of temporal concurrency of narration and narrated events in *Gilead* are regularly followed by reflections on past events:

> You and the cat have joined me in my study. Soapy is on my lap and you are on your belly on the floor on a square of sunlight, drawing airplanes. Half an hour ago you were on my lap and Soapy was on her belly in the square of sunlight. And while you were on my lap you drew – so you told me – a Messerschmitt 109. That is it in the corner of the page. You know all the names from a book Leon Fitch gave you about a month ago, when my back was turned, as it seems to me, since he could not, surely, have imagined I'd approve. All your drawings look like the one in the corner, but you give them different names – SPAD and Fokker and Zero. You are always trying to get me to read the fine print about how many guns they have and how many bombs they carry. If my father were here, if I were my father, I'd find a way to make you think that the noble and manly thing would be to give the book back to old Fitch. I really should do that. But he means well. Maybe I'll just hide the thing in the pantry. When did you figure out about the pantry? (63)

In this passage, the focus shifts from an intimate moment between father and son in the narrative present ("You and the cat have joined me in my study. Soapy is on my lap and you are on your belly on the floor") to an event in recent past ("Half an hour ago"), from a more distant past (when Robert received a gift against his father's wishes) to memories of Ames' father's parenting ("If I were my father"), and finally from hypothetical events in the near future ("Maybe I'll hide the thing in the pantry") to a distant future that Ames will not survive to witness ("When did you figure out about the pantry?"). The cited passage is thereby paradig-

matic for the manner in which presentness in the novel facilitates an oscillation between or even simultaneity of present, recent past, distant past, and future as well as an oscillation between and simultaneity of the lives of Ames' son, Ames, his father, and his grandfather – in the process creating continuity between four generations and a community of "imaginative love" (Robinson, "Imagination" 21) for the fictional as well as the actual reader.

While the presentness of Ames' narrative is irrefutable, it is not dominating the narrative. *Gilead*'s grammatical tense oscillates between the dominant past tense when Ames recounts events from the recent as well as distant past and instances of present tense in which Ames addresses his son directly. The haste of ellipsis, of verbless sentences, of dashes and exclamation marks is absent from *Gilead* even in sections composed in the present tense. If anything, the narrative pace appears *slowed-down*.[93] This impression is achieved in the novel through recurrent retardations of the plot's progression in the narrative present. Ames himself addresses the retardation of the plot's progress: "I suppose I might tell you a story about him, too, or as much as behooves me. Another time. I must reflect on it first. When I've had a little opportunity to talk to him, I might decide all that trouble is well forgotten and write nothing at all" (84). These retardations can assume the shape of inserted memories, the recapitulation of events introduced earlier in the text, the detailed description of natural phenomena, or the declaration of personal opinions and preferences. At other times, retardations occur through the reiteration of particular themes and motifs, such as fatherhood, blessing, baptism, water, and light. They occur on all time levels and are responsible for the novel's episodic structure – comparable to a collection of anecdotes in a journal – with its autobiographical vignettes forming a larger mosaic of Ames' life. Presentness in *Gilead* thus cannot be exclusively re-

[93] James Wood remarks on the slowed-down tempo of the narrative in his review of the novel: "Gradually, Robinson's novel teaches us how to read it, suggests how we might slow down to walk at its own processional pace, and how we might learn to coddle its many fine details" ("Acts of Devotion" n. pag.). Laura Tanner argues that the slowed-down pace of the narrative imitates the slowed-down sensory perception preceding death, the "heightened capacity to inhabit the perceptual moment" ("Looking Back" 232).

sponsible for the novel's appearance of immediacy. As the narrative present is set in 1956 and many of the vignettes date back to the early twentieth and mid- and late nineteenth century,[94] *Gilead*'s immediacy is not founded on a contemporary setting either. Rather, this quality can be equally attributed to *Gilead*'s narrative mode and perspective, evoking a deep view into Ames' consciousness.

"Light within Light": Evoking Depth of Human Consciousness and Spatial Immediacy

Intimate insight into the consciousness of *Gilead*'s protagonist John Ames – and therefore his sincerity – is evoked on the narrative level of the novel through an artful manipulation and orchestration of the first-person perspective: By shifting between direct discourse, interior monologue, and an authorial perspective, the reader continuously moves closer to and further away from the narrating consciousness. By further shifting the focalization from the 'narrating' to the 'experiencing self' (Stanzel 212) through an incorporation of free indirect discourse in passages of Ames' recollections, the reader is repeatedly pulled in and out of the narrating consciousness. The effect, I argue, is one of a depth of consciousness made accessible to the reader, and thus of seeming spatial immediacy.

Just as the novel's vignettes alternate between episodes set in the narrative past and the narrative present, they also alternate between views of the narrator's inner and outer states. In addition to the instances cited above where Ames describes his immediate environment ("Soapy is on my lap and you are on your belly" 63; "You and Tobias are hopping around the sprinkler" 73), he also gives descriptions of his physical appearance in the present tense ("I have a good head of hair, not as evenly distributed as it might be, but pretty thick where it

[94] Ames recounts personal memories of his father and of his grandfather, of his own youth, and of his namesake Jack 'John Ames' Boughton's youthful misdemeanor. Spanning the period from the 1830s to the 1950s, the dying minister chronicles numerous historical contexts and events as if incidentally, for example the Abolition movement, the Civil War, both World Wars, Depression, and the droughts of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The historical context that haunts the novel, as discussed above, is the African-American Civil Rights Movement that emerged in 1956.

grows and a good white. My eyebrows are white, too, and quite thick" 197). Complementing the descriptions of these outer conditions are direct descriptions of the narrator's inner status, his state of feeling, in the present tense ("[…] at this very moment I feel a kind of loving grief for you as you read this, because I do not know you, and because you have grown up fatherless" 122; "If the point was to make me angry, I am angry as I write this" 253). Dorrit Cohn argues that it is the first-person narrator's characteristic need to "tell his inner and outer condition anew every time he picks up his pen for a new installment" that endows the epistolary novel with its traditional "focus on the present moment" (209). The narrator of a first-person narrative, especially that of a letter, typically accounts directly for his thoughts and feelings, like Ames does in the above-cited passages. Although these passages dispense with quotation marks – the narrator reserves these for instances of direct speech reported in the letter – they appear as direct speech because in several of these instances the fictional reader, Ames' son Robert, is addressed directly as "you".

Such direct declarations of feeling, however, are infrequent in the novel. More often, the vignettes in *Gilead* assume the form of an interior monologue. Following the syntactical conventions of a letter or journal entry, an interior monologue is a longer representation of interior discourse that imitates thought patterns more closely than the shorter, quoted variety. These passages are also composed in the first person and present tense:

> The moon looks wonderful in this warm evening light, just as a candle flame looks beautiful in the light of morning. Light within light. It seems like a metaphor for something. So much does. Ralph Waldo Emerson is excellent on this point. It seems to me to be a metaphor for the human soul, the singular light within the great general light of existence. Or it seems like poetry within language. Perhaps wisdom within experience. Or marriage within friendship and love. I'll try to remember and use this. (140).

Just as the episodic chronotopological structure of the novel – following the pattern of a spiral with passages distinctly echoing each other – imitates the associative and circular quality of thought, the composition of the above-cited passage imitates the revisionist process of thought

formation ("Or," "Perhaps") and the asyntactic pattern of thought discourse: The paratactic structure of short sentences without coordinating or subordinating conjunctions ("It seems like a metaphor for something. So much does.") is reinforced by elliptical sentences ("Perhaps wisdom within experience. Or marriage within friendship and love"). Compared to the reproduction of a character's stream of consciousness in modernist literature, Ames' interior monologue appears very much syntactically coherent. This, however, can also be attributed to the novel's literary sincerity, its desire to be understood. While the formalistic experiments of Modernism with authentic expression were meant to render consciousness more *truly*, the internal monologues of post-postmodern family fiction are meant to render consciousness more *reliably*, ensuring communication and trust.

The above-cited passages contribute to the characteristic presentness of the epistolary and give a seemingly direct account of the protagonist's inner and outer state. However, they are not exclusively responsible for the sincerity effect of the narrative – the "spiritual force" that James Wood attributes to the novel ("Acts of Devotion" n. pag.). The direct representation of figural consciousness through interior monologue can evoke transparency of mind through the imitation of thought processes (associative logic, elliptic structure, asyntactic patterns); yet it is the indirect rendering of consciousness in *Gilead* that simultaneously evokes depth of mind and its accessibility. Accordingly, much of *Gilead* is not composed as interior monologue but rather as a narration of past events that at times acquires the quality of a third-person narration within a first-person perspective. Ames thereby becomes a kind of third-person narrator of his father's, grandfather's, and his namesake's life stories. For example, Ames writes about the relationship between his hard-working mother and his altruistic grandfather:

> I remember once he came into the kitchen while she was doing her ironing. He said, "Daughter, some folks have come to us for help." "Well," she said, "I hope they can wait a minute. I hope they can wait till this iron is cool". After a few minutes she put the iron on the stove and went into the pantry and came out with a can of baking powder. She delved around in it with a form until she had a quarter. She did this again until she had a quarter and two dimes lying there on the table She picked them up and pol-

> ished the powder off with a corner of her apron and held them out to him. Now, forty-five cents represented a good many eggs in those days – she was not an ungenerous woman. He took them, but it was clear enough he knew she had more. […] That day, though, he stood there with those three coins in his drastic old mummified hand and watched her with that terrible eye, and she crossed her arms right over the handkerchief with the hidden money in it, as he clearly knew, and watched him right back, until he said, “Well, the Lord bless you and keep you,” and went out the door. My mother said, “I stared him down! I stared him down!” She seemed more amazed than anything. (37–38)

This excerpt is a paradigmatic example of how passages resembling an authorial narrative situation are inserted into the general first-person narrative situation of the novel. The passage is framed by the first-person narration of the protagonist, which is evident from the deixis of the personal and possessive pronouns ‘I’ and ‘my’ (“I remember once,” “My mother said”). In between, however, the narrative situation resembles the authorial type, featuring a third-person narrator and quoted dialogue. The narrator employs the third-person pronouns ‘he’ and ‘she’ to describe characters (“she was not an ungenerous woman,” “his drastic old mummified hand”) and events (“he came into the kitchen,” “she put the iron on the stove”) from an external perspective. The narration even appears to approach omniscience, eschewed only by inserting that it was “clear enough” that grandfather Ames could see through his daughter-in-law’s behavior.

In a similar manner, Ames also becomes the omniscient narrator of his own life story, relating episodes from the narrative past in which he appears both as (present) narrator and (past) character. Whereas the focalization in the above-cited passage remains in a sense external – the events are seen from the viewpoint of the narrator rather than of the figures (Ames’ mother and grandfather) – this is not the case when Ames depicts his younger self in the narrative past.[95] Here, a shift in focalization takes place between the John Ames of the narrative present and the John Ames of the narrative past that can be fathomed as a shift between the

[95] Cohn emphasizes the role of the narrative past in first-person narratives with regard to the representation of inner lives: “The fact that autobiographical narrators also have inner lives (their own past inner lives) to communicate has passed almost unnoticed. But retrospection into a consciousness, though less ‘magical’, is no less important a component of first-person novels than inspection of a consciousness is in third-person novels” (14).

'narrating' and the 'experiencing' selves of the protagonist (Stanzel 212). The present narrating Ames thereby accounts for the past, experiencing Ames' thoughts and feelings through indirect rather than direct discourse and in the past rather than the present tense. Adopting Dorrit Cohn's terminology from her study *Transparent Minds: Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction* (1978), I differentiate between narrated monologue as "a character's mental discourse in the guise of the narrator's discourse" (approximating free indirect discourse), psycho-narration as "the narrator's discourse about a character's consciousness" (approximating indirect discourse), and quoted monologue as "a character's mental discourse" (approximating direct discourse) (14).[96] The experiencing self emerges in instances where the narrator accounts indirectly for a past situation as it was experienced by him at the time through psycho-narration and (self-)narrated monologue, rather than through quoted or interior monologue, effectively treating his past self as a character.[97]

A particularly illuminative example of this is the following excerpt from an episode in which Ames and his father are searching for and find grandfather Ames' grave in Kansas, far away from his family in Iowa:

> Every prayer seemed long to me at that age, and I was truly bone tired. I tried to keep my eyes closed, but after a while I had to look around a little. And this is something I remember very well. At first I thought I saw the sun setting in the east; I knew where east was, because the sun was just over the horizon when we got there that morning. Then I realized that what I saw was a full moon rising just as the sun was going down. *Each of them was standing on its edge, with the most wonderful light between them. It seemed as if you could touch it, as if there were palpable currents of light passing back and*

[96] Quoted monologue, "from a purely grammatical point of view, is simplest to define": it is given as direct thought, requires no synchronicity with the tense of the narrative voice, is expressed in principle clause, presented in the first person, and also at times employs verbs of cognition: "(He thought:) I am late / (He thought:) I was late / (He thought:) I will be late" (104–05). Narrated monologue "[l]inguistically […] is the most complex of the three techniques: like psycho-narration it maintains the third-person reference and the tense of narration, but like the quoted monologue it reproduces verbatim the character's own mental language" (14): "He was late. / He had been late / He would be late" (105). Psycho-narration, "[t]he most indirect technique" of the three, is achieved through the transposition of figural thought into a secondary clause, a simultaneous alignment with the narrative tense system, and consistent third-person reference. Cohn gives the following examples for psycho-narrative clauses: "He knew he was late / He knew he had been late / He knew he would be late" (105).

[97] The narrating and experiencing perspectives, however, cannot be absolutely separated (Bray 27). Rather, as Cohn proposes, the relationship of experiencing self to narrating self in a first-person narrative situation is comparable to that of the character to the narrator in an authorial narrative situation (14).

> *forth, or as if there were great taut skeins of light suspended between them.* I wanted my father to see it, but I knew I’d have to startle him out of his prayer, and I wanted to do it the best way, so I took his hand and kissed it. (Robinson, *Gilead* 15, emphasis added)

In the above-cited passage, the narrator moves from a report of the young Ames’ experience in psycho-narration, employing cognitive verbs (“thought,” “knew,” “realized”), to a rendering of the boy’s consciousness in narrated monologue (in italics). Both psycho-narration and narrated monologue are indirect modes of representation of figural thought and both retain – in contrast to direct discourse in the form of quoted monologue – a third-person reference. Physical observations are typical of psycho-narration and bespeak its ultimately authorial perspective (“truly bone tired,” “keep my eyes closed”). Narrated monologue, however, blurs the grammatical line between the narrator’s voice and figural consciousness by omitting cognitive verbs of introduction and synchronizing the monologue with the remaining narrative tense-system for a seamless transition. The experiencing self thereby appears to be “formulating it in his mind” (Cohn 103), with the effect of reduced distance between the reader and figural consciousness. The protagonist’s mind becomes, in this sense, accessible to the reader, and the narrative assumes an appearance of sincerity.

The duality of Ames’ narrating and experiencing selves in *Gilead* introduces a second, seemingly less controlled plane of the narrator’s mind that effectively evokes a depth of figural consciousness brought to the surface for the reader to witness. This sincerity effect is the result of spatial immediacy evoked through frequent shifts within the first-person perspective (between an overt first-person and a more covert, embedded third-person perspective) as well as the manipulation of the narrative mode for the representation of consciousness (through psycho-narration and narrated monologue). Narrated monologue thereby implies, to a higher degree than psycho-narration, the narrator’s loss of control over the presented figural discourse, therefore suggesting an uncensored view on the protagonist’s inner life. Yet narrated monologue remains the narrator’s discourse, and narrative control is never actually relin-

quished or subverted. Cohn defines narrated monologue as "a character's mental discourse in the guise of the narrator's discourse" (14), or, in the case of the epistolary novel, the experiencing self's mental discourse in the guise of the narrating self's epistolary discourse. This ostensible loss of control and apparent accessibility of a deeper layer of mind in narrated monologue correlates with sincerity, where the same effect is desired: a high degree of control/design/craft producing a seemingly transparent representation of interiority. In the following subchapter, I will examine a third narrative technique for the seemingly transparent representation of consciousness in *Gilead*: the foregrounding of sensory perception.

"Light that Rests on Your Shoulders": Sensory Perception and the Rendering of Consciousness

The (spatial as well as temporal) immediacy – and, as I argue, sincerity – evoked in *Gilead* is only secondarily that of the narrating self, accounting for itself directly and in the present tense, and primarily that of the experiencing self, being represented indirectly and in the past tense by the narrating self through psycho-narration and narrated monologue. This latter, indirect representation of consciousness subtly reduces the distance between the reader and protagonist by blurring the grammatical lines between the narrating and experiencing selves. In contrast to the direct representation of consciousness in quoted monologue, which appears "fenced off from the surrounding narration" (Cohn 123), narrated monologue, with its synchronized tense system and relinquishing of cognitive verbs, appears to be transparent and therefore sincere. However, it is not only the indirect representation of consciousness that brings forth the experiencing self in Robinson's novel. Insight into the intimate self of the protagonist in *Gilead* is also evoked through a particular emphasis on the narrator's sensory perception. In the above-cited passage, the 'present' Ames is accounting for the 'past' Ames observing the setting of the sun in the west while the moon simultaneously rises in the east. At their sensory and emotional height, the boy's observations are rendered in narrated mono-

logue, seemingly free of the narrator’s discourse, giving them the appearance of uncensored access to the figural consciousness (“Each of them was standing on its edge, with the most wonderful light between them. It seemed as if you could *touch* it, as if there were *palpable* currents of light passing back and forth, or as if there were great taut skeins of light suspended between them” Robinson 15, emphasis added). Sensory descriptions such as of taste, sight, sound, smell, or touch are markers of figural consciousness not uncommon in narrated monologue. In *Gilead*, they are used to evoke a highly subjective perspective – a ‘window into the intimate self’ – and are thus part of the novel’s rhetorical strategy of sincerity.

In her article “Sensory Perception and the Anticipation of Absence in Marilynne Robinson’s *Gilead*” (2007), Laura E. Tanner argues that the sensory descriptions in *Gilead* are literary representations of the heightened sensory perception characteristic of old age: “Ames’ journal offers a series of achingly beautiful images of a world soon to be lost to a man whose awareness of his impending death heightens the powers of his perception and renders his every sensation an emotional and aesthetic composition” (234–35). She further argues that the heightened physical and psychological subjectivity of Ames’ perception allows the reader to identify with the protagonist, to “inhabit his experience of seeing, to occupy not only the porch, the prairie, and the pulpit but the psychic space of displacement” (251). This argument recalls Adam Smith’s theory of sympathy and his claim, discussed above, that sympathy requires identification, whereas identification requires an act of imagination based on the credible representation of feeling, i.e., the rhetorical practice of sincerity. The sensory specificity of Ames’ observations allows for such an identification as it shifts the attention from the described to the consciousness doing the describing, and by doing so, it produces a ‘window into the intimate self’, rendering it accessible to the reader’s imagination and sympathy.

The foregrounding of sensory perception in the memories rendered makes Ames’ account appear highly idiosyncratic.

> I was struck by the way the light felt that afternoon. I have paid a good deal of attention to light, but no one could begin to do it justice. *There was a feeling of a weight of light – pressing the damp out of the grass and pressing the smell of sour old sap out of the boards on the porch floor and burdening even the trees a little as a late snow would do. It was the kind of light that rests on your shoulders the way a cat lies on your lap. So familiar.* Old Soapy was lying in the sun, plastered to the sidewalk. You remember Soapy. I don't really know why you should. She is a very unremarkable animal. I will take a picture of her. (Robinson, *Gilead* 59, emphasis added)

Again, this quotation features a passage of narrated monologue (emphasized by italics) embedded in psycho-narration ("I was struck by the way the light felt that afternoon") and direct discourse addressed to the reader ("You remember Soapy") with elements of internal monologue ("I have paid a good deal of attention to light, but no one could begin to do it justice," "I don't really know why you should. She is a very unremarkable animal. I will take a picture of her"). The description of the light given in narrated monologue is distinctly synesthetic, meaning that it involves more than one sense. As in the passage cited before, light is portrayed as having a sensory attribute – a weight – besides its visual characteristics. The weight of the light 'presses out' other haptic qualities, such as the "damp" of the grass, but also other sensory impressions, such as the "smell of sour old sap." In another passage, weight becomes audible: "I loved the sound of the latch lifting. The building has settled into itself so that when you walk down the aisle, you can hear it yielding to the burden of your weight. It's a pleasanter sound than an echo would be, an obliging, accommodating sound" (70). It is the synesthetic idiosyncrasy of sensory descriptions that endows these passages with an appearance of immediacy. This effect is amplified by the use of narrated monologue and paratactic, incomplete sentences, characteristic for the interior monologue of the novel ("So familiar"). The artful combination of sensory description, narrated monologue, and interior monologue allows the reader to "inhabit" the experience of the narrated consciousness and thereby its "psychic space" (Laura Tanner, "Looking Back" 251).

It is worth noting that the frequent sensory observations in Robinson’s novel do not counteract the “Protestant bareness” James Wood ascribes to it (“Acts of Devotion” n. pag.). On the contrary, as aesthetic illustrations of what Robinson in an interview called the “numinous” quality of the ordinary (qtd. in Fay n. pag.), they contribute to the seemingly plain tone of *Gilead*. Although sensory impressions are highly subjective, and Ames’ synesthetic descriptions of them are particularly idiosyncratic, they are also often familiar in their description of ordinary phenomena, such as light, water, pets, or unremarkable faces. It is the combination of idiosyncratic descriptions and familiar phenomena that renders Ames’ ‘inner view’ susceptible to identification and sympathy. In *Gilead*, sensory impressions further connect the past with the present and one generation with the next, as in the following passage:

> You had honeysuckle, and you showed me how to suck the nectar out of the blossoms. You would bite the little tip off a flower and then hand it to me, and I pretended I didn’t know how to go about it, and I would put the whole flower in my mouth, and pretend to chew it and swallow it, or I’d act as if it were a whistle and try to blow through it, and you’d laugh and laugh and say, No! no! no!! And then I pretended I had a bee buzzing around in my mouth, and you said “No, you don’t, there wasn’t any bee!” and I grabbed you around the shoulders and blew into your ear and you jumped up as though you thought maybe there was a bee after all, and you laughed, and then you got serious and you said, “I want you to do this.” And then you put your hands on my cheek and touched the flower to my lips, so gently and carefully, and said, “Now sip.” You said, “You have to take your medicine”. So I did, and it tasted exactly like honeysuckle, just the way it did when I was your age and it seemed to grow on every fence post and porch railing in creation. (58–59)

The foreboding and melancholic tone of this passage (“You have to take your medicine,” “seemed to grow on every fencepost and porch railing in creation”) is juxtaposed with the playful rhythm of the winding sentences and the humor of the son’s quoted interjections. The honeysuckle connects father and son in the narrative present, but also reaches back across decades to a period when Ames was a boy like his son (“it tasted exactly like honeysuckle, just the way it did when I was your age”), establishing a parallel and a connection that is meant for a fictional reader in the diegetic future. In passages like these, *Gilead* particularly recalls the genre of personal history, the autobiographical familial practice of communication

discussed above that is meant to create stability between generations by building an imagined intergenerational community through a foregrounding of private memories and love.

In summary: Through their sensory specificity – what Laura Tanner refers to as "the *textured immediacy* of a young boy's embodied apprehension of the moment" (229, emphasis added) – *Gilead*'s vignettes resist a narrow typological reduction of their Christian symbolic use of water, light, fire, and fatherhood. In the preceding analysis, I have argued that the immediacy of Ames' narrative, its "spiritual force" (Wood, "Acts of Devotion" n. pag.) pertains to both a temporal and spatial immediacy, to an impression of both presentness and depth. I have claimed that the element that most effectively evokes immediacy in *Gilead*, however, is the simultaneity of the protagonist's present/narrating and his past/experiencing selves. The resulting subtle shifts within the first-person perspective – rendered through a manipulation and careful orchestration of narrative mode and perspective – are reinforced by the idiosyncratic descriptions of familiar sensory perceptions, to the effect that they seem to open a 'window into the intimate self' of John Ames for the reader. This window allows for a seemingly transparent and unrestricted, but evidently framed and selective insight into the narrator's consciousness. Accordingly, Ames assures his son, the fictional reader of the novel: "If I feel that what I tell you is untrue in some way, or that I simply ought not to tell it, I can just destroy these pages. They certainly won't be the first I've destroyed" (182). This assertion of sovereignty over the discourse implies that sincerity in *Gilead* is a voluntary act of the narrating subject, an *act of social exchange* that reflects a 'desire to be understood', as remains to be discussed in the final section of this chapter.

II.2.2 "Artists of Our Behavior": Sincerity as a Social Act in *Gilead*

In 1741, Richardson, who is commonly regarded as the 'architect' of the epistolary genre, published two influential works, almost alongside one another: *Pamela, or Virtue Rewarded* – arguably the prototype of the epistolary novel – and a widely perceived nonfictional book of model letters with the abbreviated title *Familiar Letters on Important Occasions*, Richardson thus wrote – apparently simultaneously – a novel pioneering a new literary form for the sincere representation of its heroine Pamela's struggle to maintain her virtue, and a compositional guidebook on how to reproduce this sincerity effect in the reader's own epistolary correspondence. This gives way to an underlying conception of sincerity as a craft that is pragmatic – rather than cynical or sentimental[98] – in its articulation of a social desire to communicate. The full title of this guide for the composition of epistolary discourse reads: *Letters Written to and for Particular Friends on the Most Important Occasions Directing not only the Requisite Style and Forms to be Observed in Writing Familiar Letters; But how to think and act Justly and Prudently in the Common Concerns of Human Life*. Richardson's compositional guide thus illustrates succinctly that the letter form is both an attempt to communicate interiority subjectively and the replication of an accepted set of linguistic conventions that assures that what is being represented is recognizable. The social and performative dimensions of letter writing and, by extension, of sincerity become evident as the author offers advice "not only" on "style and forms" but also explicitly on how to "think and act justly and prudently". Arguably, the epistolary novel is suited for the exhibition of both the performative and social qualities of sincerity (Sinanan and Milnes, "Introduction" 21).

[98] The sentimentalism of Richardson's novel *Pamela* was the target of a satirical work published in 1741 under the title *An Apology for the Life of Mrs. Shamela Andrews* – in short: *Shamela*. The short novella has been ascribed to Richardson's contemporary Henry Fielding. In this work, Fielding parodies Richardson's technique of 'writing to the moment': "Mrs. Jervis and I are just in Bed, and the Door unlocked; if my Master should come – Odsbobs! I hear him just coming in at the Door. *You see I write in the present Tense*, as Parson Williams says. Well, he is in Bed between us, we both shamming a Sleep, he steals his Hand into my Bosom, which I, as if in my Sleep, press close to me with mine, and then pretend to awake" (330, emphasis added).

The socio-performative dimension of sincerity, understood as an act that strives for a meaningful connection between individuals by appearing to render an inner emotional state on an exterior representational surface so as to make it intelligible to a counterpart and discussed more broadly in the introductory chapter of this work, is to a great extent determinative of Marilynne Robinson's 'generational letter novel' *Gilead*. For example, Ames writes to his son:

> Calvin says somewhere that *each of us is an actor on a stage* and God is the audience. That metaphor has always interested me, because it makes us *artists of our behavior*, and the reaction of God to us might be thought of as *aesthetic rather than morally judgmental* in the ordinary sense. How well do we understand our role? With how much assurance do we perform it? (146, emphasis added)[99]

The social responsibility the minister feels for others is rooted in Christian theology and follows Christian moral principles of behavior. Just preceding the above-cited passage, Ames instructs his son: "When you encounter another person, when you have dealings with anyone at all, it is as if a question is being put to you. So you must think, What is the Lord asking of me in this moment, in this situation?" (145). However, the minister's aesthetic approach to moral behavior – likening charity to the fulfillment of stage-instructions in a play – transcends conventional Christian morality: God becomes "aesthetic rather than morally judgmental" in the assessment of men's performance of sincerity toward each other. The phrase "artists of our behavior" gives further emphasis to the performative dimension of sincerity as a rhetorical practice rather than moral quality. In *Gilead*, sincerity – described as an 'artistry of behavior' by the novel's narrator – becomes the Christian aspiration to fulfill an impenetrable divine plan assigned to the individual as if by a stage director ("So you must think, What is the Lord asking of me in this moment, in this situation?").

However, like the duality of individual faith and community of believers in Puritan practices of rhetorical sincerity, the formation of social connections and the establishment of

[99] Calvin did not repudiate the theater in general (Bouwsma 177–88). For Calvin on man as actor, see *Institutes* 1.5.1-2 and 1.6.2.

meaning are also central functions of literary sincerity in *Gilead*. In the following passage, found toward the end of the novel, Ames opens a discussion of existential human isolation by quoting verse 1 Corinthians 2:11: “For who among men knoweth the things of a man, save the spirit of the man, which is in him?” (233). The verse preaches that the only mind or inner self truly knowable to a person is their own – the *New American Standard Bible* translates “things” as “thoughts” (Lockman Foundation n. pag.) – and proposes an analogy of this circumstance to the mystery of God: “Even so the thoughts of God no one knows except the Spirit of God” (Lockman Foundation n. pag.).Yet, in the novel, Ames does not quote this latter part of the verse, omitting the reference to the mystery of God to give emphasis to the mystery of intersubjective relations between people. Ames continues:

> In every important way *we are such secrets from each other*, and I do believe that there is a separate language in each of us, also a separate aesthetics and a separate jurisprudence. Every single one of us is a little civilization built in the ruins of any number of preceding civilizations, but with our variant notions of what is beautiful and what is acceptable – which, I hasten to add, we generally do not satisfy and by which we struggle to live. *We take fortuitous resemblances among us to be actual likenesses*, because those around us have also fallen to the same customs, trade in the same coin, acknowledge, more or less, the same notions of decency and sanity. But all that really just *allows us to coexist with the inviolable, untraversable, and utterly vast spaces between us*. (233–234, emphasis added)

Employing striking imagery of “little civilizations” separated by “untraversable and utterly vast spaces,” this passage contains a vivid illustration of the social need for sincerity as rhetorical practice allowing for intersubjective connection and the communication of meaning despite “untraversable” isolation. This isolation is absolute because it includes not only an “inviolable” spatial distance between its actors – Ames considers the metaphor of “planets […] sloughed from the same star,” yet prefers “civilizations built in the ruins of other civilizations” for its “historical dimension” and “seeming continuity” (234) – but also a separateness of language, rendering people “[i]n every important way […] secrets from each other”. What allows for connection and community despite this fundamental separation are “resemblances” construed as “likenesses,” an interpretation enabled by communally recognized social proto-

cols, expressed in the "customs" and "notions" acknowledged by "those around us" – in other words, the rhetorical practice of sincerity.

Thus, instead of culminating in the impenetrability of God's will inherent in the verse, Ames' exegesis of 1 Corinthians 2:11 retains the focus on the impenetrability of the minds of "those around us" (233). To counter the resultant isolation, Ames posits practices of communication based on culturally established conventions of meaning, identifiable as practices of sincerity: representations of the self that accommodate for the other's concepts of self, creating "resemblances" that are taken for "likenesses" (233). In the introduction to her essay collection *The Death of Adam*, Robinson also proposes that it is this creation of intelligible self-representations that forms the basis for civility and declares it a "sad failure that we have not done more to make the world intelligible to ourselves, and ourselves to the world" (10). Robinson shares what she calls the "sentimental dream of humane collective life" (30), a humanist belief in civil society based on the mutual trust and accountability brought about by rhetorical practices of sincerity. This faith in collective life is manifest in *Gilead* through what Lisa Bailey refers to as a "desire to be understood" (278) and Michael Vander Weele as the "difficult gift of human exchange" (217). The novel's original practice of sincerity is Ames' writing of an 'endless letter', attempting to ensure that his son properly understands him after he has passed. Throughout the novel, however, Ames further attempts to both understand and make himself understood to others. One example of this is his relationship to his friend Robert Boughton's prodigal son and Ames' namesake, Jack. Jack likewise strives to be recognized and understood, professing to suffer from his existential isolation: "'Does it seem right to you,' he said, 'that there should be no language between us?'" (*Gilead* 201). Asked about his faith by the minister, Jack struggles with a sincere response: "I am trying to be honest" (201). Jack's struggle is reflected in Ames' own difficulties to make himself understood to his namesake when Jack's words are echoed in his own later in the novel: "I'm ashamed to have said

such a thing. But I'm trying to be honest" (223) and "That language isn't sufficient, but for the moment it is the best I can do" (224). These attempts to advance mutual trust and understanding through a shared language that remains a surrogate for 'true' meaning – a 'resemblance' rather than a 'likeness' – constitute practices of sincerity on the plot-level of the novel.

In his article "Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead* and the Difficult Gift of Human Exchange" (2010), Michael Vander Weele argues that the novel raises the question of "whether a prayer, poem, or a poetic novel might be personal and *social* rather than personal and *private*" (221, emphasis in original). Opposing the view of "literature as a compensatory art" (236), Vander Weele sees Robinson's novel as emphasizing feeling for social rather than private purposes. This perspective is supported by Ames' concession that, for him, "writing has always felt like praying, even when I wasn't writing prayers, as I was often enough. You feel that you are with someone" (*Gilead* 20). For Ames, writing possesses the "inwardness of prayer" (Vander Weele 220) – elsewhere the minister states that one could read "through fifty years of my innermost life" in his collected sermons (*Gilead* 46) –, but it also connects the self to the other, making the writer (and the reader) "feel that you are with someone" (*Gilead* 20) through acts of "imaginative love" (Robinson, "Imagination" 21).[100] Vander Weele further argues that it is "the desire to give counsel and the aphoristic form that counsel takes" in the novel that endow this highly personal account of an inner life with a distinctly social orientation. Consequently, if inwardness in *Gilead* is articulated for the social benefit of the other – to create an act of social exchange – it becomes an act of literary sincerity.

The pursuit of personal and social connection in *Gilead* is not confined to the characters' efforts at sincere communication; the novel in its entirety can be taken to constitute an act of

[100] In an interview, Robinson claims that "books are good company. Nothing is more human than a book" (qtd. in Fay n. pag.).

social exchange (cf. Vander Weele). The frequent instances of (symbolic) communion and baptism in the novel – moments of connection and exchange – and the overall epistolary form support this claim. A general argument can be made for (literary) writing as better suited for sincere communication than verbal exchange, as, in the words of Richardson's Clarissa, written words "have [an] advantage from sitting down to write them which prompt speech could not always have" (qtd. in Bray 58). This "advantage" of the written word, I aim to show, is that of an artfully crafted transparency, of a seeming absence of rhetoric, which in Robinson's *Gilead* takes the shape of immediacy and in Franzen's *The Corrections* one of accessibility. *Gilead* further supports the thesis of sincerity's 'media specificity' by way of Ames' repeated reference to his inability to make himself verbally understood to other characters, such as his namesake Jack Boughton or even his wife Lila, in stark contrast to the very effective sincere self-presentation in his 'endless letter'. A poignant example for literature as an act of social exchange is contained in *Gilead* in the form of a *mise en abyme* – a novel within the novel: The minister's significantly younger wife is repeatedly referred to as reading a novel with the title of *The Trail of the Lonesome Pine* (1908), a historical bestseller that to some extent mirrors *Gilead's* subplot of the socially and age-wise 'unequal' marriage between Lila and John Ames.[101] By picking up and reading the romance novel on which his wife places such exceptional emphasis, Ames comes to better understand her feelings: "It strikes me that your mother could not have said a more heartening word to me by any other means than she did by loving that unremarkable book so much that I noticed and read it, too" (156). Here, a literary text becomes the means for intersubjective connection and understanding.

In a similar manner, Jonathan Franzen emphasizes the potential of literature to form a "middle ground" on which meaningful encounters between individuals can occur ("David Foster Wallace" 164). Franzen also makes an argument for the media-specificity of sincerity,

[101] Recently, Ames' second wife's story has been retold from her own perspective, creating multiperspectivity between the single perspectives of Robinson's *Gilead*, *Home*, and *Lila* (2014).

contrasting literature with film, which I will elicit in the following chapter. In his novel *The Corrections*, literary sincerity assumes the form of an ‘aesthetics of accessibility’, a rhetorical mask that aims to approximate interiority on a representational surface with the purpose of assigning social meaning to an otherwise unfathomable inner self, and of forming social bonds. Religion is largely absent from Franzen’s fictional and non-fictional writing,[102] but, as I will show, the two dissimilar authors share a deep belief in literature’s ability and responsibility to communicate sincerely: “I want to feel,” Marilynne Robinson writes, “that art is an utterance made in *good faith* by one human being to another” (“Introduction” 4, emphasis added).

[102] In his memoir *The Discomfort Zone* (2006), Franzen includes passages on his membership in a Christian youth organization in his early adolescence.

III Writing Inner Lives: Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections*

"As the narrator remarks, matter-of-factly, 'That was family life.' And telling the story of this inner life is what novels, and only novels, are for."

Jonathan Franzen, "The Greatest Family Ever Storied" (2012)

"And so, layer by layer, I built up the masks. Like with papier-mâché, strip after strip, molding ever more lifelike features, in order to perform the otherwise unperformable personal drama."

Jonathan Franzen, Interview in *Paris Review* (2010)

III.1 "Mr. Difficult": Oprah and the End of Books

In the first section of this chapter, I provide an introduction to the poetics of Jonathan Franzen by analyzing examples of his non-fiction as they relate to sincerity. Further, I identify the major contexts in which his recent literary work is located. For this purpose, I interweave three related elements: the Oprah scandal, the 'end-of-book-anxiety' that informs Franzen's critique of so-called new and particularly visual media, and the notion of accessible literature. As I will demonstrate, all three of these elements are related to questions of sincerity and the rendering of emotions. Particularly the much-discussed media scandal surrounding Franzen's disinvitation from Oprah Winfrey's televised book club has – albeit implicitly – focused on the author's and the show host's respective moral sincerity in the conflict and will therefore be reexamined from this perspective. What emerges from this reexamination is Franzen's critique of visual media and his conception of sincerity as a media-specific effect of literature. The fear of literature's seemingly imminent loss of influence in a society increasingly determined by digital media, on the other hand, is a critical factor in the author's return to literary realism and his attempt to create a more accessible literature. My purpose in the following

subchapter is therefore to suggest that the artistic concept shaping Franzen's work is a representational, rather than moral, approach to sincerity.

"This is so fundamentally bogus!": The Oprah Book Club

When Oprah Winfrey announced on September 24, 2001 that she picked Jonathan Franzen's third novel *The Corrections* for her book club, some critics considered this a "bold and generous choice" for the format (Miller, "Book Lover's" n. pag.). The story of a Midwestern family's struggle with the patriarch's Parkinson's disease – published only three weeks prior to Winfrey's announcement and already a national bestseller – was perceived to have a "Rubik's-Cube-like plot" (Bang n. pag.), told from multiple perspectives and in multiple timeframes. Others, however, considered the Oprah Book Club (in the following OBC) ill-suited for the discussion of a work with literary ambition reaching beyond the show's characteristic human interest: "This is a difficult book for us," one of Winfrey's producers is quoted to have admitted: "I don't think we're going to know how to approach it until we start hearing from our readers" (Franzen, "St. Louis" 289).[103] One critic voiced the concern that "thousands of people won't read this book for no other reason than the fact that Oprah recommended it" (Weich n. pag.). And indeed: At the time of the OBC announcement, Franzen was participating in an extended book tour where he reports to have encountered representatives of both attitudes: "Beginning the next night, in Chicago, I'll encounter two kinds of readers in signing lines and in interviews. One kind will say to me, 'I like your book and I think it's wonderful that Oprah picked it'; the other kind will say, 'I like your book and I'm so sorry that Oprah picked it'" ("St. Louis" 300). Then, a month later, on October 22, 2001, Franzen was officially disinvited from the show for appearing "uncomfortable and conflicted about being chosen as a book club selection" (Winfrey qtd. in Rooney 33). While the novel stayed in the show's

[103] A visual approach to the novel continues to prove to be difficult, as the failure to convince test audiences with the unreleased pilot of an HBO adaptation of the work illustrates (cf. Satran).

canon (cf. Oprah's Book Club), it was never presented to or discussed with OBC audiences. Winfrey's unprecedented disinvitation was provoked by various public comments that Franzen had made about his status as an 'Oprah author'. In an interview with the *Portland Oregonian*, for example, he admitted to having almost immediately considered rejecting the invitation (Rooney 44).[104] The falling out between Winfrey and Franzen became an issue widely discussed in the media, which largely portrayed Franzen as ungrateful and elitist, calling him a "'pompous prick' in *Newsweek*, an 'ego-blinded snob' in the *Boston Globe*, and a 'spoiled, whiny little brat' in the *Chicago Tribune*" (Franzen, "St. Louis" 300). Franzen immediately issued an apology via his publisher's press office, accepting the responsibility for the situation and publicly defending "Oprah's contributions to the American literary community" (Rooney 50) to the point of thanking Winfrey "for her enthusiasm and advocacy on behalf of *The Corrections*" in his National Book Award acceptance speech in the fall of 2001 (Franzen, "National Book Awards" n. pag.). Nine years later, in September 2010, Winfrey announced once again that a work by Jonathan Franzen had been selected for her book club, his fourth novel *Freedom* (2010). This time, the author appeared on the show in early 2011 and the conflict was put to rest.

Nonetheless, the author's initial discomfort with being chosen for OBC, his subsequent disinvitation from the show and the generally hostile public reaction revealed an enduring gap in North American culture, dividing audiences along the intertwined lines of class, gender, and race; a gap that postmodern art theory had allegedly attempted to close.[105] According to

[104] Franzen's reservations have been widely discussed and documented in a number of journalistic (cf. Miller, "Book Lover's"; Sweet; and Campbell) and academic (cf. Ribbat, "Handling"; Rooney 33–66; Freitag 86–103; Green 79–103) sources. While the author's discomfort with being marketed as an OBC author was not a singular occurrence, Franzen had been particularly outspoken about it. The *Chicago Tribune* quoted other OBC authors, voicing similar concerns, and Franzen refers to this circumstance himself in an interview with *Newsweek* (Rooney 46 and 52).

[105] Leslie Fiedler famously declared that the tendency of postmodernism to "turn High Art into vaudeville and burlesque at the same moment that Mass Art is being irreverently introduced into museums and libraries is to perform an act which has political as well as aesthetic implications: an act which closes a class, as well as a generation gap" (359). Fredric Jameson, in his seminal study *Postmodernism, or the Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991), characterizes a breakdown of the distinction between 'high' and 'low' culture as one of the markers of

this divide, there is a highly ideological and problematic correlation between readers and reading material: Literature of the 'high art' standard is read mostly by white, higher middle to upper-class male North Americans, whereas popular fiction and sentimental romance is consumed by a demographic group that consists largely of lower to middle-class female readers of color. In the context of the high-low divide, the OBC has been both credited with allowing television audiences to engage with literature in non-academic ways and criticized for promoting a one-dimensional, sentimental approach to complex works of literature.[106] In her study *Reading with Oprah* (2008), Kathleen Rooney argues that Winfrey's disinvitation of Franzen was a missed opportunity to publicly examine this cultural divide and its reductive dichotomies regarding class, gender, and race; the consumption of fiction; and the reductive approach to literature promoted by the OBC (58). The conflict between show host and author, however, can also be read as one of sincerity: In her chapter on the conflict, with the bespeaking title "Jonathan Franzen Versus Oprah Winfrey: Disses, Disinvitations, and Disingenuousness," Rooney offers a play-by-play moral assessment of the unfolding of the conflict. Her analysis culminates in an attribution of disingenuousness to both parties, judging both Franzen and Winfrey to have behaved insincerely: "[…] I do feel compelled to point out, before going any further, how disingenuous both Franzen and Winfrey were in their own respective handlings of this unfortunate impasse" (47). Winfrey's disingenuousness, according to Rooney, consists of having offered little to no personal explanation, whereas the guests on her television show are routinely asked to give highly emotional accounts of their personal situations (47–48). Franzen's more frequent attempts at vindication, on the other hand, were sup-

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the postmodernism. As Jameson phrases it, the various forms of postmodernism "have, in fact, been fascinated precisely by this whole 'degraded' landscape of schlock and kitsch, of TV series and Reader's Digest culture, of advertising and motels, of the late show and the grade-B Hollywood film, of so-called paraliterature, with its airport paperback categories of the gothic and the romance, the popular biography, the murder mystery, and the science fiction or fantasy novel: materials they no longer simply 'quote', as a Joyce or a Mahler might have done, but incorporate into their very substance" (3).

[106] For a general discussion of the sociopolitical role of the institution of the book club in terms of its position within the high art / low art debate, motivated by class-conflict, see Radway. For more specific discussion of Winfrey's televised book club in terms of not only class and literary taste but also of gender and race in the public sphere, see Shattuc; Illouz, "Shadowy Realm"; Illouz, *Oprah*; and Peck.

posedly marked by "irresponsible and phony behavior," as he portrayed himself as a "cultural naïf," blindsided by the media (48): "[M]any of his observations […] sounded surprising, if not insincere" (48–49). The moral sincerity of the author and the show host is thus a central element in the representation and judgment of the Oprah-Franzen conflict. A rhetorical or representational conception of sincerity, however, emerges from the author's own presentation of the falling out in a personal essay entitled "Meet Me in St. Louis" (2001), as I will show in the following.[107] I argue that the conflict between Winfrey and Franzen is rooted not so much in the difference between an elitist and an egalitarian approach to literature, as in the author's conception of how emotions are rendered differently in literature than they are on television. This difference leads to Franzen's critique of visual media, which contrasts the visual representation of surfaces with literary representations of depth and interiority.

Franzen's vindicating essay begins by exposing the staged character of emotions on television:

> On a chilly morning in late September, by the side of a truck-damaged road that leads past brown fields to unwholesome-looking wholesalers, a TV producer and his cameraman are telling me how to drive across the Mississippi River toward St. Louis and what, approximately, I should be feeling as I do so. ("St. Louis" 286)

In this passage, Franzen is quite literally receiving off-stage instructions for his emotional performance. Disregarding the author's repeatedly expressed reservation about returning to his Midwestern suburban family home in St. Louis, Missouri, the OBC's producers insist on filming Franzen in his hometown for a "visual biography […] and an impressionistic summary of *The Corrections*," regardless of the author's protest that "St. Louis doesn't really have anything to do with my life now" (289). Cooperating to the best of his ability, Franzen finds himself "*pretending* to check out" (288), "*trying* to appear" (288), and "*pretend[ing]* to arrive" (287, emphases added). The moral critique Franzen levels against the *Oprah Winfrey*

[107] "Meet Me in St. Louis" is a reference to the 1944 musical film from Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer with the same title.

Show here – "we're doing nothing more dubious morally than making television" (287) – is clearly that of insincerity, of a dissimulation of emotions. In the course of the essay, however, the perspective shifts from moral to rhetorical critique. Franzen examines the particular rhetorical character of the televisual representation of emotions:

> Part of me is imagining how this will play on TV: as schmaltz. Rendering emotion is what I do as a writer, and this tree is my material, and now I'm helping to ruin it. I know I'm ruining it because Gregg is frowning at me the way I might frown at a faulty ballpoint pen. […] In the gloom of his reply I recognize a fellow perfectionist and worrier, whose retakes are the equivalent of my rewrites. ("St. Louis" 297–98)

The parallel that the author draws between a ballpoint pen in his own hands and himself in the hands of the television crew, between his own artistic perfectionism and that of the producer, levels any general hierarchical distinction between literature and television in terms of high and low culture, instead suggesting an equivalence in terms of rhetorical artifice and artistic effort. Furthermore, the passage suggests that, while there are distinctions to be made between "schmaltz" and the "[r]endering [of] emotion," feelings cannot be represented without rhetorical mediation and are therefore always staged, whether on television or in literature.

Yet Franzen also points to a representational discrepancy between literature and television that comprises his critique of visual media. This difference is one of rhetorical sincerity, namely that between televisual and literary representations of emotions and interiority. In summary, the author criticizes television for privileging the exterior at the cost of the interior:

> I once wrote a novel that was centered on this monitory stainless icon of my childhood [the St. Louis Gateway Arch], I once invested the Arch and the counties that surround it with mystery and soul, but this morning I have no subjectivity. I feel nothing except a dullish anxiousness to please. I'm a dumb but necessary object, a passive supplier of image, and I get the feeling that I am failing even at that. ("St. Louis" 288)

As a writer, Franzen endowed a lifeless object ("the Arch") with an interior ("mystery and soul") in his first novel, *The Twenty-Seventh City* (1988), but as the object of visual represen-

tation, he remains a surface, "a passive supplier of image". The critical implication of this observation is an inability of visual media to sincerely – i.e., transparently and immediately – represent interiority. Franzen's reservations about appearing on the Oprah Winfrey Show and having his work presented in the OBC can therefore be understood to be rooted in the incapacity of television to sincerely represent emotions. From Franzen's strategic juxtaposition of the figural depth of writing ("Rendering emotion is what I do as a writer," "St. Louis" 297) with the literal superficiality of visual representation ("a passive supplier of image" 288), sincerity emerges as an effect that is media-specific and particular to literature. So, while the 'Oprah scandal' has been represented as a conflict rooted in moral insincerity (cf. Rooney), Franzen himself vindicates it as one of rhetorical sincerity – i.e., the seemingly transparent and immediate representation of an inner life for an audience to witness and relate to. When Franzen thus quotes himself as exclaiming, "This is so fundamentally bogus," in the process of filming for the OBC ("St. Louis" 298), he can be understood as addressing insincerity in rhetorical rather than moral terms.

"Why Bother?": The End of Books

Jonathan Franzen understands reading as a practice that differs from the reception of visual screen media in so far that literature allows the reader to intimately get to know the inner lives of the characters. This is evident not only from Franzen's vindication in "Meet Me in St. Louis" but also from his earlier discussion of Paula Fox's novella *Desperate Characters* (1970) – a central influence on both *The Corrections* and *Freedom* – and his discussion of its film adaptation in the seminal essay "Why Bother?". The latter was originally published in *Harper's Magazine* in April 1996 under the title "Perchance to Dream. In the Age of Images, a Reason to Write Novels" and has come to be referred to as "The Harper's essay." The subtitle of the earlier version bespeaks the central conflict, namely the purpose of literature in an age where

it competes with visual and digital media, not only for an audience but also for social relevance. Franzen's response to the question of cultural relevance emphasizes the interiority of literary representation as opposed to the "surficiality" of screen-media:

> I am able to know Sophie Brentwood [the protagonist of Fox's novel *Desperate Characters*] intimately, and to refer to her as casually as I would to a good friend, because I poured my own feelings of fear and estrangement into my construction of her. If I knew her only through a video of *Desperate Characters* (Shirley MacLaine made the movie in 1971, as a vehicle for herself), Sophie would remain an Other, divided from me by the screen on which I viewed her, by the surficiality of film, and by MacLaine's star presence. ("Why Bother" 66)

In this passage, Franzen contrasts reading about a character in a book with watching a character on screen. The Sophie of the film adaptation remains an "Other" because she is "divided from [the audience] by the screen on which [she is] viewed," her inner life unattainable, restricted "by the surficiality of film." For the sake of his argument, Franzen here greatly simplifies film as a purely visual medium that is restricted to a surface, to a "screen," and therefore "divide[s]" the audience from the characters, whereas literature allows for a permeation of this surface. Interestingly, this juxtaposition depicts literature as having the unique potential to sincerely – that is, transparently and immediately – represent a character's inner life, to reveal their true feelings and evoke an unmediated inside view. The reader is thereby able to view the literary character as if from within because they are endowing the character representation with their own feelings and constructing the literary figures in the process. According to Franzen, it is "telling the story of this *inner life* […] what novels, and only novels, are for" ("Greatest" 62, emphasis added). As in Marilynne Robinson's novel *Gilead*, in which an aging reverend can make himself understood to his family and, by extension, the reader through writing and scripted sermons, but not through spontaneous speech, sincerity emerges as a media effect particular to literature.

Framed as a personal "confession" and "a narrative of breakdown and recovery" (Green 80), "Why Bother?" registers a growing loss of the cultural relevance of literature by citing

the disappearance of fiction from public discourse – less and less fiction reviews, the disappearance of entire review publications (61) – and ascribes this loss to the failure of literature to respond to "the banal ascendancy of television" and the "electronic fragmentation of public discourse" (58). The critical context for this assessment can be found in the cultural anxiety of the 'elegists of the book', characteristic of the 1990s literary field and fueled by a previously unknown proliferation of so-called new media. Marshall McLuhan had predicted the end of the Gutenberg Galaxy as early as 1962, but "the end of books" became proverbial only at the close of the millennium: Robert Coover anticipated the possibility of literature being displaced by hypertext in a widely read *New York Times* article, titled "The End of Books" (1992), and Sven Birkerts declared a causal relationship between a decline in reading and the proliferation of the internet and the consumption of digital media in his influential *The Gutenberg Elegies: The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age* (1994). Literature had come to be seen as undermined by a growing "culture of distraction" (Green vii) that was based on an "electronic fragmentation of public discourse" (Franzen, "Why Bother" 58). Jeremy Green cites a wider range of socio-cultural, economic, and technological processes to be continuously affecting the anxieties over declining readership and literary value, including the manner in which books are distributed.[108] In his study *Late Postmodernism: American Fiction at the Millennium* (2005), he examines the interrelation of social and aesthetic developments in literary works at the turn of the twentieth century, among them Franzen's *The Corrections*. His central premise is that what he calls late postmodernist fiction – literature that is no longer postmodern in the way it was when it was first conceived[109] – confronts and negotiates the

[108] As relevant factors for the changing literary field, Green cites economic changes (the rise of the "information economy"), new media proliferation ("techno-culture"), significant restructuring of the publishing and distribution of books ("corporatization"), changes in the (self)perception of the academy and the canon ("culture wars"), and the often differing theoretical strategies of cultural studies and postmodern theory to grasp cultural commodification (19–45).

[109] Martin Klepper provides a comprehensive account of recent literary history that traces aesthetic shifts from early to late postmodernism, framed by Pynchon's *V* (1963) and *Vineland* (1990), as developing from an early *deconstructive* to a late *reconstructive* postmodernism, and claims the late postmodern literature of Thomas Pynchon, Paul Auster, and Don DeLillo is marked by 'reconstructive aesthetics' rather that 'destructive playful-

'end-of-books-anxiety' by taking up "the problems of cultural memory, the public sphere, and the political vocation of the novel" (Green 11). The renaissance of family fiction and the new literary sincerity can be placed in this context of a post-postmodern literature that reacts to a perceived loss of cultural relevance by seemingly retreating into the intimate realm of the private and familial.

The Corrections is an example of this contemporary post-postmodern literature in so far as its referential realism evades the particular aesthetic properties of self-referential postmodernism, yet, to a certain extent, comprises and negotiates the epistemological perspectives of postmodern theory.[110] In the introduction to *Postmodern Fiction: a Bio-Bibliographical Guide* (1986), Larry McCaffery speaks of a "different aesthetic sensibility" in the work of North American writers after 1975 than that "which characterized earlier postmodern writers" (xxvii). He describes the post-postmodern literary moment as a synthesis of "experimentalism and more traditional literary concerns," such as story and character, but also "political, historical, and psychological realities that are central to our experience" (xxvi). The post-postmodern aesthetic sensibility has been defined as a mixture of realist representational techniques with metafictional elements (cf. Ickstadt, Powers, Zerweck, *Synthese;* Kucharzewski and Schowalter; Burn, *Franzen*) and understood to be part of a larger dialectic of referential and self-referential representational conventions (cf. McCaffery; Ickstadt). McCaffery assigns this literary phenomenon the label "experimental realism" (xxvii), while others have employed the term neorealism (cf. Versluys, *Neo-Realism*). It would, however, constitute a great reduction of the various works produced by the authors commonly grouped under these labels – writers as diverse as Raymond Carver and Toni Morrison – to include all realist writing

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ness' (*Zerspielen*), reinstating social relationships, political strategy (feminism), knowledge, and historical understanding (374) as well as political agency, identity, memory, and history (377).

[110] This affinity is expressed in the numerous playful references to postmodern works of literature embedded in *The Corrections*: Chip's email address is exprof@gaddisfly.com (497) and the medication considered for the treatment of Alfred Lambert's growing dementia is called "Corecktall" (216), echoing a character named Recktall Brown in William Gaddis' *The Recognitions* (Green 159).

since 1975 within these concepts without further differentiation. Attempts have been made to define subcategories, such as postmodern realism, ex-centric neorealism, minimalist neorealism, and integrative neorealism (cf. Weber). Franzen's own post-postmodern aesthetic sensibility in *The Corrections* – addressing the increasing irrelevance of literature and the imminent "end of books" – is based on a concept of accessibility that the following will identify as a rhetorical strategy of sincerity, i.e., as a form of literary representation with a significant element of audience accommodation and a distinctly social dimension.

"Aesthetics of Accessibility": A Contract with the Reader

In his essay "Mr. Difficult", Jonathan Franzen delineates his personal conflict between an admiration for the scholarly intellect and large vocabulary of iconic postmodern authors such as Pynchon, Gaddis, and DeLillo on the one hand, and an author's responsibility for his readers' pleasure on the other (239–40). As the point of departure, he cites an epistolary exchange between himself and a reader who criticizes the difficulty of Franzen's diction: "She began by listing thirty fancy words and phrases from my novel, words like 'diurnality' and 'antipodes', phrases like 'electro-pointillist Santa Clause faces'" (238). Franzen's dilemma in this passage is based on two conflicting conceptions of "how fiction relates to its audience" (239), what the author subsequently describes as the status model and the contract model. While the status model is seen to promote the autonomy of art and to hinge on a "discourse of genius and art-historical importance," the contract model endorses the author's obligation toward the reader and is rooted in "pleasure and connection" (240). Taken to their extremes, the status model thus implies a conscious exclusion of supposedly 'lesser' readers and the contract model a voluntary commodification of literature as a consumer good (241). Notably, these two conceptions of the purpose and function of literature can be aligned with the previously defined distinction between authenticity and sincerity: Franzen understands the contract model to be

"balancing […] self-expression and communication within a group," which recalls Lionel Trilling's definition of sincerity as being true to one's self in order to be true to others. The status model privileges a purity of expression and autonomy of art over literature's potential for communication, echoing the conception of authenticity as being true to one's self as a means in itself, even at the price of incommunicability and social isolation (Trilling 9). Despite the disgruntled letter to the author cited in "Mr. Difficult" suggesting otherwise, Franzen clearly understands his own work to be adhering to the contract model (241). His audience-oriented aesthetic is thereby determined by a rhetorical strategy of sincerity.

Franzen critically observes that literary quality and art-historical importance have come to be equated with the supposed difficulty of a literary work and that this generalizing equation, while perhaps true for particular experimental masterpieces, has culminated in a "postmodern suspicion of realism" and any literature that appears formally accessible ("Mr. Difficult" 246).[111] An uncritical privileging of difficulty excludes non-professional, non-academic audiences not accustomed to the habitual decoding of experimental literary form. Difficulty, however, is not synonymous with complexity, even though Ben Marcus' article "Why Experimental Fiction Threatens to Destroy Publishing, Jonathan Franzen, and Life As We Know It" (2005) accuses the author of "see[ing] only one kind of difficulty: needless" (50). As the ensuing analysis of *The Corrections* and its underlying rhetorical strategy of sincerity will demonstrate, Franzen does not "surrender the language part" of literature, as Marcus suggests (46). Rather, he employs a rhetorical strategy of sincerity and practices audience accommodation because he argues that the decreasing cultural relevance of literature at the end of the twentieth century is not so much based on a shortage of culturally relevant novels as on their failure to impact the public discourse beyond the sphere of literary criticism and academic

[111] "Many readers today expect literary language to be so remote from normal speech as to be routinely incomprehensible," *The Atlantic's* B.R. Meyers writes in his widely received polemic "A Reader's Manifesto" (2001), summarizing the effect an uncritical equation of artistic quality with experimental meta-fiction has had on the literary field (n. pag.).

scholarship. The central premise here is that an intervention in the public sphere requires a language that people can relate to. What Franzen opposes is the critically established conviction that only an experimental and fragmented narrative is able to authentically reflect the uncertainty and instability of the postmodern, so-called Einsteinian universe (Leypoldt 23). He includes his own earlier work in this critique of contemporary literature and declares the critical response to his first two – formally more difficult – novels *The Twenty-Seventh City* and *Strong Motion* (1992) a "failure of my culturally engaged novel[s] to engage with the culture. I'd intended to provoke; what I got instead was sixty reviews in a vacuum" ("Why Bother" 61). In an interview on National Public Radio in 2001, Franzen claimed that his third novel *The Corrections*, although "[f]irst and foremost […] a literary book," is "an accessible literary book" (qtd. in Rooney 43). 'Accessible' here is employed as the antonym of 'difficult' and combined with the criterion 'literary', which implies an artistic quality of form. The discourse of difficulty versus accessibility corresponds to the concepts of status versus contract and authenticity versus sincerity: Aesthetically accessible literature is thereby able to "engage with the culture" and communicate through audience accommodation, whereas formally difficult literature avoids any artistic compromise at the risk of communicating "in a vacuum".

As Stephen J. Burn suggests in his study *Jonathan Franzen at the End of Postmodernism* (2008), "[t]he counters here, then, are not popular versus literary […] but might be more accurately classified with the awkward titles: academically-privileged formalist postmodernism versus story-based literature that aims to entertain the reader" (48). However, aesthetic accessibility[112] does not equal entertainment in the most banal sense of the word. Rather, the accessibility of the literary form – achieved through literary sincerity – is a rhetorical instrument in building social trust and ensuring connection within a community:

[112] "Aesthetics of accessibility" is a phrase Sibylle Freitag derived from an article by John Irving on Kurt Vonnegut's literary style to describe Jonathan Franzen's neorealism (Freitag 12 and 76ff.).

> Every writer is first a member of a *community* of readers, and the deepest purpose of reading and writing fiction is to sustain a sense of *connectedness*, to resist existential loneliness; and so a novel deserves a reader's attention only as long as the author sustains the reader's *trust*. (Franzen, "Mr. Difficult" 240, emphasis added)

On the one hand, this "sense of connectedness" – defined as the "deepest purpose" of both reading and writing fiction – is a matter of personal emotional response to a work of literature, a connection Franzen describes in physical terms as the desire to be touched by the text (261). On the other hand, this "sense of connectedness" – maintained through the experience of reading and writing literature – is less a private affair between reader and text, or even reader and author, than a distinctly public matter: "[E]very writer is first a member of a community of readers" (240). Franzen positions the participation in literary discourse as a means to maintain social cohesion. This approach to the social dimension of literature also informs the conflict between the author and Oprah Winfrey: While the OBC's therapeutic approach arguably reduces the artwork to a personal narrative of suffering and redemption, conflating the private and the public dimension,[113] literature, according to Franzen, should advance "an understanding of private experience and public context as distinct but interpenetrating" ("Why Bother" 90). The insistence on community building through literature can also be seen to illuminate the author's choice of genre in *The Corrections* as well as in his subsequent novel *Freedom* (2010): The family as a social form of organization, like sincerity, operates on the threshold between the private and the public realm and the family novel, as discussed above, thereby functions as an agent of affective crisis management.

What emerges from Franzen's essayistic work is a concern with hindered social communication: In "Why Bother?," he talks about social and communicative isolation due to changes

[113] Franny Nudelman describes this simplification of "ethical, philosophical, and sociopolitical dimensions" (qtd. in Franzen, "Why Bother" 82) in televised talk shows as the matter of a problematic conflation: "Rather than figuring the relationship between public and private, between individual and collectivity, talk show testimony conflates private experience and public debate" (Nudelman 310). As Green concurs, these "interactions between private and public states" [in televised talk shows "] do not constitute a public sphere" (88–-89),) but rather what Habermas called "a secondary realm of intimacy" (*Structural Transformation* 172).

in demographic structures and increasingly personalized media consumption (home entertainment in suburban homes); in "Imperial Bedroom," he bemoans the disappearance of urban public spaces and the public sphere; in "Mr. Difficult," he criticizes the self-oriented nature of postmodern art, concerned with its own art-historical status rather than communication and community through an unwritten contract with the reader; and in "Farther Away," Franzen portrays the rise of the realist novel in the eighteenth century as a medium to communicate interiority through characters that are particular yet universal. Franzen does not reject experimentaiton or complexity in literature per se. Rather, he argues that the contemporary conception of serious or high literature as formally difficult – employing highly idiosyncratic, i.e., supposedly authentic language – consciously disrupts communication and therefore makes it impossible to form social connections. Sincerity as a rhetorical instrument reinstates communication because it is based on shared (provisional, transpersonal, typified) and seemingly transparent, rather than idiosyncratic and ultimately opaque, rhetorical forms. Franzen's aesthetic of accessibility is thus a rhetorical strategy of sincerity.

"Everything Profound Loves the Mask": Sincerity as Social Interface

In his essay collections *How to Be Alone* (2002) and *Farther Away* (2012), Franzen repeatedly insists that participation in literary discourse – written and therefore covertly not unmediated – provides a sense of intimate connection and maintains social cohesion. This assertion is implicitly based on Richard Sennett's counterintuitive proposition that humans in fact need "barriers" to be sociable (15). In the conclusion to *The Fall of Public Man*, entitled "The Tyrannies of Intimacy", Sennett holds the "barriers of custom, manners, and gesture" to be indispensable for communication among individuals within a social context (338). Removing these barriers to intensify contact and sociability defeats its own purpose: "The closer people come, the less sociable, the more painful, the more fratricidal their relations" (338). "Custom, man-

ner, and gesture" function as an interface that allows individuals to interact. Sennett refers to these barriers as masks necessary for social interaction: "Masks permit pure sociability […]," he writes, but in secularized societies that lack religious rituals, "masks are not ready-made. The masks must be created by those who will wear them, through trial and error, through a desire to live with others rather than a compulsion to get closer to them" (264–265). In an interview with *Paris Review*, Franzen explicitly likened his own writing to the creation of masks, stressing their necessity for any articulation of self: "And so, layer by layer, I built up the masks. Like with papier-mâché, strip after strip, molding ever more lifelike features, in order to perform the otherwise unperformable personal drama" (qtd. in Burn, "Art of Fiction" 51).

Drawing on Rainer Maria Rilke's *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* (*Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge*, 1910) and Friedrich Nietzsche's aphoristic observation in *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886) that "everything profound loves the mask" (69–70),[114] Franzen speaks of the inevitability of masks for any self-expression with the goal of communication, because "the amorphous, unconscious, naked soul is horror" and ultimately not representable (qtd. in Burn, "Art of Fiction" 51). Early in Rilke's novella, the protagonist Malte encounters a woman on the street who, lifting her face from her hands too quickly, drops her face like a mask.[115] Malte avoids looking at the inside of the removed mask, but he fears the blank head without a face even more. Toward the end of *The Notebooks*, the narrator acknowledges both the desire to remove masks in order to be 'real' and the inevitability of masks for the comprehensible articulation of emotions:

[114] In a 2010 interview with *Paris Review*, Franzen paraphrases the following passage from Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886): "Everything profound loves the mask […]. Every profound spirit needs a mask: more, around every profound spirit a mask is continually growing […]" (Nietzsche 69–70).
[115] "The woman startled and pulled away too quickly out of herself, too violently, so that her face remained in her two hands. I could see it lying in them, its hollow form. It cost me indescribable effort to stay with those hands and not to look at what had torn itself out of them. I shuddered to see a face from the inside, but still I was much more afraid of the naked flayed head without a face." (Rilke 16).

> We discover, indeed, that we do not know our part, we look for a mirror, we want to rub off the make-up and remove the counterfeit and be real. But somewhere a bit of mummery still sticks to us that we forget. A trace of exaggeration remains in our eyebrows, we do not notice that the corners of our lips are twisted. And thus we go about, a laughing-stock, a mere half-thing: neither existing, nor actors. (Rilke 194)

Drawing on Rilke's novella, Franzen claims that masks are a means to convey rather than to conceal. As in the above passage, a person wishing to communicate cannot rid him- or herself of the performer's mask because, according to Diderot's *Paradox of Acting*, "it is impossible otherwise to appreciate that which passes inside us" (74). Masks do not contradict a sincere presentation of the self; on the contrary, they allow for an enactment of the emotional state in the first place and thus "make visible and feelable the unsayable things inside" us (qtd. in Burn, "Art of Fiction" 50). For Franzen, it is the creation of such masks that is exactly the social function of art, and particularly of literature. In the memorial service remarks for the late David Foster Wallace, Franzen calls these literary masks a "middle ground" between readers and writers, resembling Robinson's literary "exercises in the capacity for imaginative love" ("Imagination" 21): "But that 'neutral middle ground on which to make a deep connection with another human being'; this, we decided, was what fiction was for. 'A way out of loneliness' was the formula we agreed on" ("David Foster Wallace" 164).[116]

Elsewhere, Franzen's assertion that the author is reflected in the pages of his work further bespeaks his poetics of literary sincerity:

> If you are moved to try to return the gift that other people's fiction represents for you, you eventually can't ignore what's fraudulent or secondhand in your own pages. These pages are a mirror, too, and if you really love fiction you'll find that the only pages worth keeping are the ones that reflect you as you really are. ("Pain" 10)

[116] Sennett criticizes a loss of balance between the private and the public realm. He defines civility as the activity which protects people from each other yet allows them to "enjoy each other's company," "to forge a bond upon that social distance" (264). Franzen's notion of participation in the reading and writing of fiction as the building of social cohesion and personal connection while retaining a social distance also underlies the title of his first essay collection *How to Be Alone* (2002). The concept of reading as social – rather than anti-social – loneliness is established in David Riesman et al.'s seminal work of social analysis *The Lonely Crowd*: "To be alone with a book is to be alone in a new way" (Riesman, Denney, and Glazer 99).

Literature for Franzen becomes a representational surface akin to the mask: contiguous and a translation of the self, but neither literal nor self-identical. Sincerity is not self-identical, like authenticity, but rather – like a mask – contiguous to what is presented. This does not, however, presuppose an *a priori* self that can be simply put into words, nor are the literary masks that Franzen envisions literally autobiographical (cf. Franzen, "On Autobiographical Fiction"). The masks presented to the reader are those of the novel's characters, built-up "layer by layer" (Franzen qtd. in Burn, "Art of Fiction" 51), and the sincerity is not that of the author, but the rhetorical strategy of the narrative, evoking accessibility to the reader. Franzen endorses "the postmodern insight that there is no personality, there are just these various intersecting fields," that "personality is socially constructed, genetically constructed, linguistically constructed, constructed by upbringing" (qtd. in Burn, "Art of Fiction" 51–52). Nonetheless, he maintains that "[w]here the postmoderns go wrong is in positing a nullity behind all that" (qtd. in Burn, "Art of Fiction" 52). According to the author, whatever resides beneath personality – *persōna* meaning both character and mask – is not "nullity" so much as it is a state characterized by its fundamental inaccessibility. The rhetorical strategy of sincerity in *The Corrections* – rooted in a post-postmodern accessibility of the literary form – has been implemented with the objective of enabling deep connections with other human beings across this ultimately untraversable void.

Franzen's concern for a community of readers and writers ("Mr. Difficult" 240) and the reestablishment of communication within that community is rooted in the 'end-of-book-anxiety' of the 1990s and further determined by a critique of the surficiality and distraction of visual and digital media. The author's answer, however, to the problems of declining readership and growing social isolation despite constant virtual surveillance (cf. Franzen, "Imperial Bedroom") is a decidedly aesthetic approach to the social function of literature. The so-called social novel, a work of fiction dramatizing social problems and their effect on the character

ensemble, is a genre famously declared dead by Philipp Roth in 1961: "[A]ctuality," he claimed, "is continually outdoing our talents" to depict the rapidly changing social and technological reality of late-twentieth-century North America (120). While remaining one of the United States of America's foremost literary realists, Roth saw the presumably slow mimetic realism of literature to have become obsolete compared to the rapid social and technological developments of the post-war period. Fellow novelist Tom Wolfe took up Roth's thread in his manifesto "Stalking the Million Footed Beast" (1989). Wolfe interprets the debate over the value of social realism as a class-struggle between an academic elite and a so-called low- and middle-brow readership. He sees the solution to Roth's problem of increasingly irrepresentable actuality in a "realism more thorough than any currently being attempted" that "portray[s] the individual in intimate and inextricable relation to society around him" (50). Wolfe claims that this can be achieved exclusively though the practice of journalistic writing techniques, a "highly detailed realism based on reporting" (50). Franzen agrees with Roth's assessment of the novel as a failing medium of social reportage, and with Wolfe's political analysis ("Why Bother"). His own reanimation of the social novel, however, does not employ an accelerated mimetic description that strives to draw level with so-called new media but rather, as will be demonstrated in the latter half of the present chapter, consists of an intensified focus on his characters' inner lives.[117]

Further contributing to the debate on the proclaimed death of the social novel, Franzen shifts the focus from the content level to the literary form:

> Expecting a novel to bear the weight of our whole disturbed society – to help solve our contemporary problems – seems to me a peculiar American delusion. To write *sentences of such authenticity that refuge can be taken in them*: Isn't this enough? Isn't it a lot? ("Why Bother" 84, emphasis added)

[117] Franzen further points out that mourning the death of the social novel bespeaks gender and race blindness: "The current flourishing of novels by women and cultural minorities shows the chauvinism of judging the vitality of American letters by the fortunes of the traditional social novel" ("Why Bother" 79).

James Wood calls this approach Franzen's "aesthetic solution to the social novel" *(Irresponsible Self* 197). Yet the term 'authenticity' is misapplied here because authenticity, as discussed above, suggests an autonomy of art that the author's poetological proclamations, and not least his work itself, do not support. Franzen repeatedly emphasizes the social dimension of art, for example, when he speaks of his moral responsibility as an author.[118] Moreover, the author's use of the term 'authenticity' is not consistent. In another instance, he employs it in accordance with the above established definition, bearing connotations of retreat into the self and social indifference, as becomes clear when he employs it to describe nature's indifferent attitude toward the human race ("Farther Away" 27).[119] The inherent contradiction, however, between aesthetic solution and the social novel can be resolved if sincerity is substituted for authenticity because sincerity – a rhetorical concept that is as much concerned with form as it is with communication – balances the social with the aesthetic dimension. Similarly, Richard Sennett argues that social relations are, or should be, aesthetic relations because they have shared origins, namely the experience of play-acting during childhood, an aesthetic activity with a social element (267).[120] Franzen's endorsement of an accessibility of the literary form and his conception of literary writing as a building of masks for social connection ricochet Sennett's claim that the social and the aesthetic are indivisible. What a contemporary social novel can thus achieve is to "connect[] the personal and the more broadly cultural and social" (Franzen, "Mainstream" n. pag.) through the rhetorical strategy of sincerity.

[118] "I feel as if my moral responsibility is to talk about my own confusion, my own attempt to understand something, in an honest way. There is some chance that a reader will recognize that same confusion, that same search for something. And very importantly they may feel less freakish and alone, like he or she has company. That's the gift I have to give, that's the gift any writer has to give" (Franzen, "Zeitgeist" n. pag.).
[119] "When I go looking for a new bird species, I'm searching for a mostly lost authenticity, for the remnants of a world now largely overrun by human beings but still beautifully indifferent to us […]"("Farther Away" 27).
[120] Childhood play-acting is based, according to Sennett, on the acceptance and refinement of repeatable conventions with the goal of "immediate sociability […] at a distance from the self" (267) and is later in life elaborated through ritual: "Ritual is not self-expression; it is participation in expressive action whose meaning ultimately steps beyond immediate social life […]" (266).

In his essay entitled "Farther Away" (2011), Franzen describes a solitary bird-watching trip he undertook to a remote island, all the while reading Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), both to mourn the death of his friend and fellow writer David Foster Wallace and to restate his own poetological agenda within the context of the two authors' relationship. The essay operates with several elements established above: the conception of a 'loving' literary form, the conviction that fiction is the best way to overcome existential loneliness, and an emphasis on the so-called ordinary reader. Like Marilynne Robinson, Franzen does not explicitly declare to be adhering to a rhetoric of sincerity in either his fictional or non-fictional writing. One element of this essay, however, overtly relates to the concept of sincerity: that of granting "full fictional access to the hearts and minds" (51). Franzen locates himself and Wallace in the tradition of the eighteenth-century novel, taking *Robinson Crusoe* as the original example and later adding Samuel Richardson's *Pamela*. Although he stresses the passages of quotidian realism in *Robinson Crusoe*, Franzen ultimately arrives at the discrepancy between a literature of "radical individualism" (Defoe) and one of the "hearts and minds" (Richardson) as two approaches to the novel that remain vital today:

> Defoe had staked out the territory of radical individualism, which has remained a fruitful subject for novelists as late as Beckett and Wallace, but it was Richardson who first granted full fictional access to the hearts and minds of individuals whose solitude has been overwhelmed by love for someone else. ("Farther Away" 51)

Whereas the author ascribes Wallace to the earlier tendency, all the while drawing on the metaphorical isolation of Crusoe, he implicitly places himself within the latter approach, that of a sincere representation of emotional states. If representational sincerity makes an interior state intelligible through the use of conventionalized and therefore accessible representational means, it is performed on the narrative level. How this is done in *The Corrections* in terms of realism, genre, character, narrative mode and perspective, and chronotopological structure, will be addressed in the latter half of this chapter.

III.2 "Nudity of Form": Literary Sincerity in *The Corrections*

In an interview with *Paris Review*, Jonathan Franzen told Stephen Burn that in his most recent writing he was "looking for transparency" (61) and that this effort constitutes "almost the opposite aesthetic" of his previous work. In *Freedom* (2010), the author claims, he is "pressing language more completely into the service of providing *transparent access* to the stories […] and to the characters in those stories" (74, emphasis added). However, ten years earlier, reviewers had already remarked on the "sheer readability" of Franzen's third novel, *The Corrections* (Green 79). "Sheer readability" – in opposition to what would be opaque difficulty – is a concept routinely applied to this particular novel by critics as well as the author himself. The rhetorical basis for this perception is a semblance of narrative transparency, a "nudity of form" (Peyre 313) that appears to provide transparent access, not only to the stories and characters but also to meaning. This appearance of an unmediated representation of an interior state is constitutive of sincerity as rhetorical strategy. Sincerity as a moral ideal is commonly understood as a quality of the individual subject. Understood as a rhetorical strategy, however, sincerity is freed of this bond with subjectivity (van Alphen and Bal, "Introduction" 5) and can be seen as the rhetorical property of a literary work – or any other artwork – rather than a virtue of the author or the characters. In his study *The Sincere Ideal* (1974), Leon Guilhamet examines sincerity as a "literary standard" of eighteenth-century English literature (287). He makes a substantial distinction between "sincerity in personal relationships" – a moral quality – and "sincerity in literary composition" – a rhetorical property (287). Despite the fact that Guilhamet sees compositional sincerity as restricted to poetry, his distinction lays the foundations for a reading of prose as narrated 'with sincerity' rather than as the didactic exemplification of a moral ideal, restricted to the level of content. According to Guilhamet, compositional sincerity is based on the linguistic properties of a literary work. He draws this observation from his analysis of the poetry of William Wordsworth and the poet's aspiration to fathom the

"real language of men in a state of vivid sensation" (Guilhamet 38). In *The Corrections*, personal sincerity is largely absent on the level of the represented relationships: The protagonists of the novel – the Lamberts – do not exhibit the required "simplicity of character and frankness of heart" (Guilhamet 288). However, the narrative discourse of the novel exhibits rhetorical sincerity in regard to how the story and its characters are presented to the reader.

As discussed above, narrative discourse is necessarily mediated through language and letters; it cannot be non-rhetorical, as rhetoric comprises "the entire range of our use of 'signs' for communicating" (Booth, *The Rhetoric of Rhetoric* xi). Consequently, the evoked "vivid sensation" has to be seen as an effect of the chosen rhetorical form. This effect of immediacy and transparency is easily misinterpreted as the result of a reduction of linguistic complexity; accordingly, *The Corrections* has been repeatedly misinterpreted as "straightforward" and "classical" in structure (Freitag 141), subject to only a "loose organization" (Green 107), "not coordinated" in terms of the order of the single chapters and their diverging perspectives (Rohr 101), and being determined by a "more traditional surface" (Burn, *Franzen* 92) than its postmodern literary predecessors. However, these impressions of disorder and reduced complexity are byproducts of the novel's rhetorical strategy of sincerity, which is in fact based on a highly complex narrative structure. *The Corrections*' aesthetics of accessibility – its "nudity of form" (Peyre 313) – is an effect achieved not through a reduction of complexity on the level of diction and imagery, as Freitag suggests (83–85), but through the careful orchestration of a complex chronotopological structure and shifts in narrative mode and perspective. As discussed before, literary sincerity commonly follows one of two rhetorical modes: either a seeming artlessness to achieve an ostensible transparency of the narrative form or a seeming spontaneity to achieve an ostensible immediacy of what is being represented. Both narrative

strategies comprise a large measure of necessarily invisible control.[121] "More skill is required for such struggle toward sincerity," Peyre claims, "and even more expert artifice, than for naive writing" (313). As previously discussed, control is another element – besides audience accommodation and intelligibility – that differentiates rhetorical conceptions of authenticity from those of sincerity: Conceptually, authenticity relinquishes all control of expression, thereby risking unintelligibility, whereas sincerity employs a controlled form of representation with the objective of recognition on the part of the addressee. As a property of literary works, sincerity is thus not only highly controlled but also audience-specific. In *The Corrections*, a "nudity of form" (Peyre 313) is achieved through two central narrative strategies: an orchestration of narrative mode and perspective to achieve a seeming transparency of mind, and a manipulation of the chronological structure to evoke an unveiling of narrative meaning.

III.2.1 Transparency of Form in *The Corrections*

In a 2006 interview, Franzen declares himself part of a group of writers who perceive themselves as successors – rather than a part – of the postmodern generation (qtd. in Weich n. pag.). According to the author, these post-postmodern heirs are defined by their willingness to "look […] again at character and, in particular, at family"). "[F]amily," the author claimed, "is a source of meaning" (qtd. in Weich n. pag.), and with the loss of other stable frames of reference, such as religion, "[t]he one thing that you can't take away is that you have parents" (Weich n. pag.). Consequently, family as a literary subject, even if most literary families are shown in the process of estrangement,[122] suggests stability rooted in the essentialism of heredity. More notable for an examination of sincerity as a rhetorical strategy of contemporary fam-

[121] Of course, all literary production is subject to control of some kind. One does not even have to turn to controlling instances such as genre or the publishing industry as the sign system written language already sets limits to what can be represented and how.

[122] The Lamberts of *The Corrections* are, in this and other respects, comparable to Thomas Mann's fictional family the Buddenbrooks in his novel of the same title. North American examples for estranged literary families are William Faulkner's novels *Absalom, Absalom!* and *As I Lay Dying*, in which the estrangement is translated into the fragmented multiperspectivity of the modernist narrative form.

ily fiction, however, is the author's first statement. Franzen's claim that family is a "source of meaning" in literature presupposes the sincerity of family fiction: The ostensible transparency of meaning in family fiction is based on the expected accessibility of this particular genre. In *The Corrections*, this apparent transparency of form is evoked through two related operations: first, an appeal to tacit knowledge by way of a reinforcing constellation of literary realism and the naturalization of family as a principle of social order and, second, the representation of figural consciousness, the writing of inner lives. The first is fundamental to most other contemporary family novels, the second, although also a characteristic family fiction, is particular to Franzen's novel in its intensity and complexity.

Accessibility of Family Fiction

The notion that family understood as an order of meaning is somehow more accessible than any other social order is based on its status as tacit knowledge (cf. Polanyi). As previously discussed, the concept designates knowledge that is habitually acquired and culturally shared without awareness of its acquired quality. The seemingly unlearned, immediate recognition and acceptance of family as natural and ahistorical is based on this status as tacit knowledge. In the family novel, tacit recognition is perceived as a transparency of representation and accessibility of meaning. However, the general intelligibility of family is opposed by the idiosyncrasy of the specific family. In the introduction to the exhibition catalogue *Pleasures and Terrors of Domestic Comfort*[123] that showcases works of domestic photography, Peter Galassi makes note of a discrepancy between North American letters and photography that reveals the misconception of family as inherently transparent: Whereas North American literature has often "dwelled on the domestic", North American photography until the 1970s has been "offering an abundant record of […] avenues and side streets" (8). The reasons that Galassi states

[123] The exhibition was shown at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, September 26–December 31, 1991.

for why professional photography did not turn to the family as a viable artistic subject until the late twentieth century are that the domestic realm, the so-called private sphere, has always been both notoriously difficult to penetrate for anybody but a member of the family and, moreover, exceptionally difficult to read.

Galassi points to an affinity between the ways in which art featuring a domestic subject and non-artistic family snapshots hold meaning:

> Perhaps the most ubiquitous of all photographs, snapshots are also the most hermetic. To the insider, to the member of the family, snapshots are keys that open reservoirs of memory and feeling. To the outsider, who does not recognize the faces or know the stories, they are forever opaque. At the same time, because we all have snapshots of our own, and thus know the habit of understanding them, we are all equipped to imagine ourselves into the snapshots of others, into the dramas and passions they conceal. (11)

Although every member of so-called civil society tacitly knows the normative organizational principle of father-mother-child and its horizontal and vertical iterations along and across generations (for example, grandparent and grandchild, siblings or cousins), family life remains inaccessible to the outsider in two ways: For one, as an experience restricted by membership, family life literally takes place behind closed doors; for another, private interactions that cross over into the public realm (for example, in a "snapshot" or a family anecdote) are so idiosyncratic that they remain undecipherable to non-members.[124] The method for deducing meaning from them is therefore to "imagine ourselves into the snapshots of others" (Galassi 11). This practice is reminiscent of the production of sympathy via rhetorical practices of sincerity, as discussed in the previous chapter: A representation of feeling is being endowed with the receiver's own conceptions of the represented emotion via an act of imagination. This then allows them to identify and sympathize with the sender. The meaning of family fiction is

[124] The central subject of Christina Stead's *The Man Who Loved Children* (1940) is the idiosyncratic language use within a family that becomes unintelligible for outsiders. Franzen's essay "The Greatest Family Ever Storied" (2012) discusses this novel.

derived in a similar, circular fashion: Readers endow it with their own experience, which in turn has already been informed by discursive representations of family life.

Contemporary North American family novels thus appear sincere not because they actually express or even reproduce individual or generational experiences. Rather, they employ a rhetoric of sincerity that evokes transparency by drawing on a set of immediately recognizable images of The Family, firmly established in North American culture, which tacitly affirm the experience that the reader brings to the text. As discussed earlier, the similarly conventionalized referential language of realism – appealing to tacit or mutual knowledge and to agreed-upon images of the world rather than 'the real' itself – further evokes a transparency of literary representation – especially in contrast with the self-referential language of postmodern meta-fiction. In literary realism, culturally dominant scripts of character and action ensure the recognition of the represented world through an appeal to the reader's direct and indirect knowledge (Prendergast 61). What is recognized by the reader as real are expected images and a language that refers to literary conventions (Armstrong, *Fiction* 28). Sincerity, a form of communication that draws on established conventions to ensure intelligibility for its representation of feeling, operates on the same circular principle as realism and, in this case, the realist family novel: through an employment of recognizable images that can be endowed with the reader's direct and indirect knowledge.

Accessibility of Characters' Consciousness

In a 2001 interview with *The New Yorker*, Jonathan Franzen claims that *The Corrections*, in contrast to his earlier novels *The Twenty-Seventh City* and *Strong Motion*, privileges characterization and storytelling over a conceptual plot ("Great American Novel" n. pag.). Early criticism of *The Corrections* has recognized this aesthetic choice, and James Wood – in a re-

view comparing Franzen's work favorably to Don DeLillo's *Underworld*[125] –comments on the "softened DeLilloism" that retains "breadth and intellectual critique" while being "centered on human beings" ("Dickens" n. pag.). Subsequently, *The Corrections* has been widely understood as a return to character-based fiction in what Wood classifies as "high literature" (Wood, "Dickens" n. pag). Sibylle Freitag, for example, maintains that Franzen has foregone "an extensive plot-superstructure" in favor of a "psychological microcosm" (12). Marilynne Robinson also stresses the significance of character for her fiction and puts particular emphasis on the representation of a character's inner life: "I feel strongly that action is generated out of character. And I don't give anything higher priority than character" (qtd. in Fay n. pag.). In *The Corrections*, this renewed focus on character is primarily anchored in the particular narrative perspective of the novel: Each of the seven chapters, composed as autonomous yet interlocking "novellas" (Burn, "Art of Fiction" 69), corresponds largely to the central perspective of one of the Lamberts. Franzen has stated that he was "striving for the classical unities of place, time, and action" within the single chapters ("Great American Novel" n. pag.), referring to them as "short novel[s]" focusing on "a single situation and the screws tightened maximally on the characters in question" (qtd. in Weich n. pag.). And although the novel is narrated by a third-person narrator, the variable internal focalization of the chapters endows *The Corrections* with both multiperspectivity and the intimacy of figural perspective: Combining an uninvolved narrator who is not part of the diegetic world with the focalized perspective of the characters, the narrative perspective continuously moves between an external and an internal view of the characters. Throughout the novel, the reader thus perceives each character from differing angles and distances, depending on the focalization and narrative mode (direct, indirect, and free-indirect representation of figural discourse; quoted monologue, psycho-narration, and narrated monologue, to use Dorit Cohn's terminology). This particular mode

[125] In another interview with Burn, Franzen, acknowledges *Underworld* as a significant influence for the aesthetic of *The Corrections* (Burn, "Art of Fiction" 61).

and perspective of *The Corrections*, characterized by frequent shifts and an intermittently ambiguous narration that oscillates between a figural and an authorial discourse, contributes to the effect of a transparent narrative form by offering the reader seemingly unrestricted access to the inner lives of its characters.[126] The figural mind – represented seemingly without mediation – appears transparent and, consequently, the narrative form appears sincere.

Set in an unspecified historical present, Franzen's character-based approach to the social novel in *The Corrections* focuses on the Lambert family: the elderly baby-boomer couple, Enid and Alfred Lambert, and their grown children, Gary, Chip, and Denise Lambert. Each of the Lamberts is consumed by a private crisis: Denise, the youngest, is a starred chef who is having an affair with her business partner's wife. Chip, a failing academic, is experiencing a midlife crisis and gets involved in a confidence scam in Lithuania. Gary, the eldest, is suffering from depression and is entangled in a bitter household feud with his estranged wife. Alfred suffers from Parkinson's disease. Enid, overwhelmed with the care for her husband, is desperately trying to reunite the family for one last Christmas before the Lamberts' Midwestern family home is sold due to the patriarch's affliction. Compared to Marilynne Robinson's generational novel *Gilead*, *The Corrections* is a family novel determined by synchronic relationships rather than diachronic family genealogy. As Bakhtin suggestsed for the family novel, *The Corrections* is both focused on the traditional idyllic space – the family home – and concerned with its endangerment by intruding forces (231). This emerges as early as the opening chapter, with prominent descriptions of the Lambert home in the "gerontocratic suburbs" of the fictional Midwestern town St. Jude – patron saint of lost causes (*The Corrections* 3):

[126] According to Stephen J. Burn, *The Corrections* has been influenced by theories of self-narration such as Daniel Dennett's *Consciousness Explained* (1991) and Steven Pinker's *How the Mind Works* (1997): "[…] the entire structure of *The Corrections* is designed to reveal how each of the characters is in the process of fabulating themselves" (*Franzen* 115). Burn reads *The Corrections* as "an encyclopedia of the twenty-first-century self, a theater Franzen has designed to bring the different conceptions of selfhood his characters draft to explain themselves to themselves into conflict" (*Franzen* 115).

> Although Enid's ostensible foe was Alfred, what made her a guerilla was the house that occupied them both. The furnishings were of the kind that brooked no clutter. […] Unfortunately, Enid lacked the temperament to manage such a house, and Alfred lacked the neurological wherewithal. Alfred's cries of rage on discovering evidence of guerilla actions – a Nordstrom bag surprised in broad daylight on the basement stairs, nearly precipitating a tumble – were the cries of a government that could no longer govern. (7)

The events of the novel are presented from a multiplicity of perspectives, orchestrated around Alfred Lambert's fall into the ocean and his ultimate demise.[127] Jörg Richter claims the multiperspectivity of family fiction to be a means to transport the fragmentation and dehierarchization of the modern (family) experience. Kerstin Dell proposes the opposite, namely that the characteristic narrative structure of the genre communicates the unified perspective of the family not so much to articulate a state of disorder as to try to remedy it. Either way, multiperspectivity is a central element of the genre of the family novel in general and of *The Corrections* in particular. I argue that the particular multiperspectivity of *The Corrections* serves to obscure and unveil what can be seen as the truth or meaning of the narrative, evoking in the smaller and larger instances of revelation a narrative sincerity.

Each of the seven chapters of *The Corrections* can be roughly assigned to one or several family members in terms of both story and focalization. The novel is framed by a short opening chapter ("St. Jude") and a short closing chapter ("The Corrections"). The first comprises both Enid's and Alfred's respective attitudes toward their married life as well as their old age; the latter summarize the events after Alfred's death and is focalized exclusively through Enid. Each of the three grown children, Gary, Chip/Chipper, and Denise, serves as a reflector figure for the narrative voice in three separate chapters: The second chapter, "The Failure," recounts, Chip's career path from professor to script writer to aspiring confidence man from his perspective, with occasional focus on and focalization through Enid, Alfred, and Denise. The

[127] The death of a parent is a common characteristic of the genre. See, for example, Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*, Mathew Sharpe's *The Sleeping Father* (2003), or Dave Eggers' *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* (2000).

third chapter, "The More He Thought About It, The Angrier He Got," gives an account of Gary's paranoid and depressed mental state and hostile married life, with very brief instances of focalization through Enid and Denise, and is also the only main chapter (except for the exposition and closing chapter) not to contain analepses. Burn interprets this as a reflection of Gary's obsession with his mental state, leaving no room for other characters' consciousness or even biographical depth (*Franzen* 105–06). The fifth chapter, "The Generator," details in multiple analepses the sexual awakening of Denise Lambert from her own perspective.[128] The fourth and central chapter, "At Sea," takes place within the confined space of a cruise ship and, again, alternates between Alfred's and Enid's perspective.[129] This chapter supplies biographical background to both characters and contains a central analepsis to an early family dinner in St. Jude when Gary and Chip were still children. This central scene alternates between the perspectives of all five Lamberts, highlighting their frustrations with each other, even that of the unborn Denise in her mother's womb.[130] Framed by the elderly couple's disillusionments, the chapter ends with Alfred's presumably suicidal fall into the ocean. In terms of overall structure, this is approximately the moment in the narrated time span that the previous two chapters, as well as the following chapter, lead up to and with which the sixth and penultimate chapter, "One Last Christmas," begins.[131] The latter gives an account of the family's failed attempt at a reunion in St. Jude after Alfred's fall and progressing mental deterioration, alternating once again (as in the central analepsis in "At Sea") between all five Lamberts' perspectives. What emerges is a pattern of multiple focalizations (integrated through an

[128] "The Generator" is the name of the restaurant Denise Lambert is hired to cook for, but it is also a description of Denise, who (with an affair with a much older co-worker of her father) sets Alfred's early retirement and the conflicts that resulted from this in motion.
[129] "At Sea" further incorporates one of two noteworthy side character's perspectives, namely Sylvia Roth's account of her daughter's murder. The other is Robin Passafaro's account of her anarchist brother's violent crime and appears in the fifth chapter, "The Generator."
[130] "'Keep your voice down! ' (Keep your voice down or the baby might hear.) (Indeed did hear and was soaking up every word.)" (*The Corrections* 319)
[131] Stephen J. Burn has devised a useful graph for the elaborate overall chronological narrative order of *The Corrections* (*Franzen* 102).

omniscient narrator) that shifts not only between chapters but also to varying degrees within a chapter or even within a few pages (especially in chapters four and seven).

The Corrections employs both indirect and free indirect discourse for the representation of figural consciousness to the extent that it largely outweighs any direct discourse or authorial report of external events in the novel that is not internally focalized through one of the characters. According to Dorrit Cohn, "narrative fiction attains its greatest 'air of reality' in the representation of a lone figure thinking thoughts she will never communicate to anyone" (7). Adopting Cohn's terminology, as in the previous chapter on Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead*, I differentiate between narrated monologue as "a character's mental discourse in the guise of the narrator's discourse" (approximating free indirect discourse); psycho-narration as "the narrator's discourse about a character's consciousness" (approximating indirect discourse); and quoted monologue as "a character's mental discourse" (approximating direct discourse) (Cohn 14). Of the last there is little to none in *The Corrections*: Thought is rarely given directly as quoted monologue, although most spoken character interaction is given as direct speech and makes for a larger portion of the novel's discourse. If at all, silent quoted monologue is given in italics, to set it apart from spoken quoted dialogue given in quotation marks: "*Stay the course*, Denise enjoined herself. *Be sisterly*" (474). Almost entirely focalized through the respective members of the Lambert family, however, the novel offers numerous instances of narrated monologue. These are often shorter passages embedded within longer passages of psycho-narration, statements (or, more often, exclamations) in the third person, determined by the tense system of the remaining narrative but without any cognitive verbs to introduce them:

> What Gary hated most about the Midwest was how unpampered and unprivileged he felt in it. St. Jude in its optimistic egalitarianism consistently failed to accord him with the respect to which his gifts and attainments entitled him. *Oh, the sadness of this place! The earnest St. Judean rubes all around him curious and undepressed. Happily filling their misshapen heads with facts. As if facts were going to save them! Not one woman half as pretty as Caroline. Not one other man with a decent haircut or an abdomen as flat as Gary's. But, like Alfred, like Enid, they were all extremely deferential*. […] God, he hated

> the Midwest! He could hardly breathe or hold his head up. He thought he might be getting sick. (203–204, emphasis added)

This passage begins with the statement that the Lamberts' eldest son Gary 'hates' the Midwest and 'feels' unprivileged, and ends with him having problems 'breathing' and 'thinking' he might 'get sick'. These statements are made in the mode of psycho-narration, featuring typical cognitive formulations ("Gary hated" and "he thought") and physical observations (the inability to "hold his head up") that bespeak an authorial perspective. In contrast, the framed passage of narrated monologue – emphasized in italics – reads as though the figure in question were "formulating it in his mind" (Cohn 103), but is presented by the narrator.

Because of its exclamatory character, the cited passage ("Oh, the sadness of this place!") resembles quoted monologue. However, the third-person references ("him" and "Gary's") and the past tense clearly identify it as narrated monologue. By synchronizing the tense for the narrator's reporting language and the figure's reflecting language, narrated monologue allows for a blurring of the grammatical distinction between an interior state and its outward representation. It is this particular quality of narrated monologue – the almost seamless oscillation between figural and authorial perspective, the seemingly fluid interconnection of consciousness and its verbal representation – that reduces the distance between narrative voice and figural consciousness and, by extension, the distance between the reader and the figural consciousness. According to Cohn, the "relationship between words and thoughts" is left "latent," the "figural consciousness" is "suspend[ed] on the threshold of verbalization in a manner that cannot be achieved by direct quotation" (103). The narrative mode of *The Corrections* – taken here to mean the degree of a narrator's apparent influence over the presentation of events and character discourse – creates a low degree of narrative distance that correspondingly suggests

a low degree of mediation.[132] The effect is a seeming transparency of mind that evokes a sincerity of the literary representation.

In turn, the reader is given access to each character's mind in similar passages of seemingly unmediated introspection. Oftentimes they reveal a family resemblance of injured pride and entitlement, as in the following passage focusing on Alfred's frequent business trips:

> Nighttime was a different matter. By night he lay awake on mattresses that felt made of cardboard and catalogued the faults of humanity. It seemed as if, in every motel he stayed in, he had neighbors who formicated like there was no tomorrow – men of ill-breeding and poor discipline, women who chuckled and screamed. […] Alfred blamed the girl for taking it easy. He blamed the man for his easygoing confidence. He blamed both of them for lacking the consideration to keep their voices down, *How could they never once stop to think of their neighbor, lying awake in the next room?* He blamed God for allowing such people to exist. He blamed democracy for inflicting them on him. He blamed the motel's architect for trusting a single layer of cinder block to preserve the repose of paying customers. […] He blamed his fellow guests for their indifference to the fornication, he blamed all of humanity for its insensitivity, *and it was so unfair. It was unfair that the world could be so inconsiderate to a man who was so considerate to the world. No man worked harder than he, no man made a quieter motel neighbor, no man was more of a man, and yet the phonies of the world were allowed to rob him of sleep with their lewd transactions. He refused to weep.* He believed that if he heard himself weeping, at two in the morning in a smoke-smelling motel room, the world might end. *If nothing else, he had discipline. The power to refuse: he had this*" (283–84, emphasis added).

The passage begins with the external observation from an authorial perspective on Alfred in a motel room at night (underlined) and continues with a list of reproaches given in psycho-narration (no emphasis) – containing cognitive formulations such as "it seemed as if," "he blamed," and "he believed" – before culminating in an emotional breakdown presented in narrated monologue (italics). This narrative technique of moving from the outside to the inside of a character by way of manipulation of the narrative mode evokes an accessibility of

[132] All literary discourse is mediated through a narrative voice. Lower mediation can be achieved only as an effect of the narrative mode through, for example (but not coercively), the free and direct representation of discourse (dialogue or inner monologue) (Jahn and Nünning 294) as well as through a relinquishment of narrator-commentary, through an abundance of seemingly insignificant detail (Barthes' *éffet de réel*), through an approximation of narrated and narrative time and the chronological representation of events, through internal focalization, and through the imitation of the characters' idiosyncratic speech by the narrative voice, even when not presented directly (Martínez and Scheffel 49–51).

the character's mind, and therefore the sincerity of the narrative, but not necessarily the sincerity of the character him- or herself.

Cohn claims that narrated monologue as a literary technique has the potential to implicate the narrator and, by extension, the reader in figural thought and feelings, in contrast to quoted monologue, which is "fenced off from the surrounding narration" (123): The blurring of the line between figural thought and authorial perspective on the grammatical level has the effect of emotional identification with the character in question. Similarly, Wayne C. Booth claims that the "solution to the problem of maintaining sympathy despite almost crippling faults" is to "use the heroine herself as a kind of narrator, though in third person, reporting on her own experience" (*The Rhetoric of Fiction* 245). This means that it is the manner of representation – the apparent inside view of a character by means of narrated monologue – and not their moral properties that create sympathy in the reader (*Rhetoric of Fiction* 377–78). In *The Corrections*, these inside views are often accompanied by an ironic authorial assessment in the form of dissonant psycho-narration, meaning a representation of figural consciousness that retains authorial markers, such as cognitive verbs, and is further marked by an emotional or evaluative distance between figural consciousness and authorial rendering, rather than a blurring of distinctions as in narrated monologue.[133] These ironic assessments of the characters' mental discourse allow the reader to retain a distance. This distance, however, does not contradict the effect of sincerity: On the contrary, the critical distance of dissonant psycho-narration – often taking on the form of an ironic tone in authorial narration – enables the narrator to "manifest dimensions of a fictional character that the latter is unwilling or unable to betray" (Cohn 29). In the above-cited passages, the narrative voice reveals Gary's

[133] Cohn differentiates between consonant and dissonant psycho-narration: The consonant type is marked by lesser emotional distance between narrative voice and focalized character: a "discretion of the narrating voice," an absence of "evaluative judgments" (32), a "cohesion" induced by "the manner in which thoughts and feelings are intertwined" (31), while the dissonant type is marked by a larger critical distance between figural consciousness and narrative voice. Of the two types, dissonant outweighs consonant psycho-narration in *The Corrections*.

unacknowledged sense of entitlement when he is reported to hate how the Midwest makes him feel "unpampered" and "unprivileged" and how his hometown, in its "optimistic egalitarianism," fails to recognize his "gifts and attainments" (*The Corrections* 204) as well as Alfred's delusion of grandeur when he blames God and democracy for his lack of sleep. In fact, it is this quality of *The Corrections* that is both characteristic and hard to isolate: the constant oscillation in tone between ironic distance and emotional implication. Recent criticism understands this phenomenon as a marker of post-postmodern literature and subsumes it under post-irony (Konstantinou), new sentimentality (Epstein, Genis, and Vladiv-Glover), new sincerity (Fitzgerald, "Sincerity, Not Irony"; Fitzgerald, *Mother's Morals*), or sincere irony that dissolves the dichotomy of the two concepts (Magill, *Sincerity*). In terms of narrative technique, the making of post-irony in *The Corrections* takes place on the level of narrative mode and perspective: By combining dissonant psycho-narration with instances of narrated monologue, by blurring the line between the narrator's assessment of his characters, between the characters' self-perception and the reader's emotional implication, the text creates an ironic distance while simultaneously evoking empathy through its multiple "prolonged and deep inside views" (Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* 377–78).

This technique of repeated shifts in perspective and mode is so fundamental to *The Corrections* that it is difficult to choose a single example. In the following passage, taken from the central analepsis in the fourth chapter "At Sea," the middle child Chipper is left at the table to finish his dinner while the rest of the family retreats to the basement for their respective evening recreational activities. In this condensed excerpt, the focalization shifts from Enid to Chipper, to Gary, to Enid, to Chipper, to Alfred, to Chipper. The execution of these shifts is complex because it consists not only in a repeated change of focus from one character to the other but also in a rapid change of focalization and narrative mode. The latter especially means that the reader's distance to the figural consciousness is consistently readjusted, literal-

ly allowing the narrator, and by extension the reader, to weave in and out of the characters' minds:

> Enid plunged a knife into *the pineapple's jaundiced belly*. She decided that Chipper was exactly like his father – *at once hungry and impossible to feed. He turned food into shame. To prepare a square meal and then to see it greeted with elaborate disgust, to see the boy actually gag on his breakfast oatmeal: this stuck in a mother's craw. All Chipper wanted was milk and cookies, milk and cookies.* […] Chipper's head was bowed, *but the son who loved to eat reached eagerly for his dish*. Gary slurped and aerated, wordlessly consuming pineapple. *The dogshit-yellow rutabaga; the liver warped by frying and so unable to lie flush with the plate; the ball of woody beet leaves collapsed and contorted but still entire, like a wetly compressed bird in an eggshell, or an ancient corpse folded over in a bog*: the spatial relations among these foods no longer seemed to Chipper haphazard but were approaching permanence, finality. […] She was hampered by pregnancy or at least the idea of it, and Gary could have trounced her, but her pleasure at being played with was so extremely evident that he simply disengaged himself, mentally multiplying their scores or setting himself small challenges like returning balls to alternating quadrants. Every night after dinner he honed this skill of enduring a dull thing that brought a parent pleasure. It seemed to him a lifesaving skill. He believed that terrible harm would come to him when he could no longer preserve his mother's illusions. *And she looked so vulnerable tonight. The exertions of dinner and dishes had relaxed her hair's rollered curls. Little blotches of sweat were blooming through the cotton bodice of her dress. Her hands had been in latex gloves and were as red as tongues*. […] It [the ball] bounced up and knocked on this door before subsiding. Enid pursued carefully. *What silence, what darkness, there was behind that door. Al seemed not to have a light on.* […] There existed foods that even Gary hated – Brussels sprouts, boiled okra – and Chipper had watched his pragmatic sibling palm them and fling them into the dense shrubbery from the back doorway, if it was summer, or secrete them on his person and dump them in the toilet, if it was winter. Now that Chipper was alone on the first floor he could easily have disappeared his liver and his beet greens. The difficulty: his father would think that he had eaten them, and eating them was exactly what he was refusing now to do. […] *Only you and your refusal remained. And like self-pity, or like the blood that filled your mouth when a tooth was pulled – the salty ferric juices that you swallowed and allowed yourself to savor - refusal had a flavor for which a taste could be acquired*. In the lab below Alfred sat with his head bowed in the darkness and his eyes closed. *Interesting how eager he'd been to be alone, how hatefully clear he'd made this to everyone around him; and now, having finally closeted himself, he sat hoping that someone would come and disturb him.* […] Every time his wife's footsteps approached the lab he braced himself to accept her comforts. Then he heard the game ending, and he thought surely [emphasis in original] she would take pity on him now. *It was the one thing he asked of her, the one thing* – […]. With unspeakable expenditure of will Alfred turned on a light and opened his lab notebook. / *Even the most extreme boredom had merciful limits*. The dinner table, for example, possessed an underside that Chipper explored by resting his chin on the surface and stretching his arms out below. At the farthest reach were baffles pierced by taut wire leading to pullable rings. […] Even more rewarding were the patches of booger he'd left behind

> during previous vigils. The dried patches had the texture of rice paper or fly wings. *They were agreeably dislodgable and pulverizable*. (302–307, emphasis added)

I quote extensively here to convey how the narrative perspective of *The Corrections* is defined by shifts and oscillation: for one, in terms of narrated space between the characters on different levels of the family home (between the boy at the dinner table on the first floor, mother and son around the basement Ping-Pong table, and the father behind closed doors in his amateur metallurgical lab also in the basement), for another, in terms of figural consciousness and outward perception between an internal and an external perspective on the figures. The result is an account of this particular evening from four different figural perspectives[134] plus the authorial perspective of the narrator, condensed within a few pages. Non-verbal events and the physical/external appearance of characters are given from both an authorial and a figural perspective. These descriptions alternate between two modes of figural consciousness representation: narrated monologue and psycho-narration. The effect of this complex constellation of figural/authorial as well as internal/external perspectives on and distances to the narrated events is, however, not that of a loss of perspective or order but rather one of plurality and carefully conceived inside views.[135]

In the quoted passage, the underlined excerpts are accounts of actions and physical demeanor given as external observations from an authorial perspective (e.g., "Gary slurped and

[134] Figural perspective is a technical term Nünning/Nünning adopt from Manfred Pfister's theory of drama (Pfister 90). It is determined by the information available to the figure in question, its psychological disposition and ideological orientation (Nünning and Nünning 48). Moreover, Nünning/Nünning understand perspective in this case to mean a combination of visual and cognitive aspects, combining an art-historical with a philosophical understanding of the term. The central difference between the figural perspective in prose and in drama is – unless the entire novel is given in direct speech – the additional mediation by a narrating instance in prose (49).

[135] Multiperspectivity in a contemporary literary context is often assumed to promote a specific postmodern epistemological quality, namely that of a loss of perspective (Nünning and Nünning 60–61): The meaning is no longer monolithic, truth is inherently subjective, inseparable from the point of view of its representation (cf. Zerweck, "Loose Your Sense of Perspective"). However, divergence from a single-point perspective system is not a twentieth-century phenomenon, as eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novels already employed multiple perspectives for disruptive and skeptical epistemological purposes, often through framing devices and/or the incorporation of other text types such as letters and diaries (cf. Allrath; Nieragden). Modernist literature especially has embraced multiperspectivity as a literary technique to both extend and subvert Victorian literary representations of consciousness (cf. Rogge-Wiest). In addition, Pam Morris claims that realist texts as well "use narrative repetition to challenge simplistic views of reality: an event retold from different perspectives suggests that truth may be shifting and even multiple" (109).

aerated, wordlessly consuming pineapple," "In the lab below Alfred sat with his head bowed in the darkness and his eyes closed"). Other observations of physical appearance are given as subjective perceptions from a particular figural perspective (Enid about her son Gary: "*the son who loved to eat reached eagerly for his dish*," Gary about his mother: "*she looked so vulnerable tonight*"). A third type seamlessly combines an authorial and a figural perspective within one sentence ("Enid plunged a knife into *the pineapple's jaundiced belly*", "Chipper's head was bowed, *but the son who loved to eat reached eagerly for his dish*"). The italicized passages indicate the use of narrated monologue, a mode that – as discussed above – blurs the grammatical line between narrative voice and figural thought by omitting cognitive verbs of introduction, yet synchronizing the monologue with the narrative tense-system and thereby producing effects of seamlessness and transparency of mind. As in Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead*, sensory descriptions such as taste or touch are also markers of figural consciousness represented in the mode of narrated monologue ("*like the blood that filled your mouth when a tooth was pulled – the salty ferric juices*," "*the texture of rice paper or fly wings*"). The passages without emphasis constitute statements in the mode of psycho-narration, representing figural consciousness not through the approximation of verbalized thought (as in narrated monologue), but rather through the narrator's focalized dissonant or consonant narration ("Gary could have trounced her, but her pleasure at being played with was so extremely evident that he simply disengaged himself"). As discussed above, this technique allows for distanced, often ironic authorial assessments of the characters' thoughts and feelings, giving the reader an impression of privileged insight into the figural psyche ("She was hampered by pregnancy or at least the idea of it," "The difficulty: his father would think that he had eaten them, and eating them was exactly what he was refusing now to do").

Even though the shifts between characters and the shift between an authorial and a figural perspective can occur in very short progression, the narrated monologue in this passage and in

the novel overall consists of thought that can be (more often than not) positively attributed to a particular character (Chip describes his food as "dogshit-yellow," 302; Enid refers to her husband as "Al" when thinking to herself and as "Dad" when talking to her children, 311). The shifts between figural and authorial narrative perspective as wells as between the perspectives of different figures are often clearly marked by a change of mode: A shift in perspective is often introduced with an authorial description of actions or appearances of the focalized character before permeating the surface with narrated monologue or psycho-narration ("[Chip's interior perspective:] *refusal had a flavor for which a taste could be acquired*. [Shift to Alfred described externally:] In the lab below Alfred sat with his head bowed in the darkness and his eyes closed. [Shift to interior perspective] *Interesting how eager he'd been to be alone, how hatefully clear he'd made this to everyone around him* […]"). At times, however, narrated monologue can be attributed to more than one character, highlighting their family resemblance ("Alfred turned on a light and opened his lab notebook. [Paragraph break followed by a passage not unequivocally attributable to either Alfred or his son] *Even the most extreme boredom had merciful limits*. [Unequivocal shift to Chip] The dinner table, for example, possessed an underside that Chipper explored"). Also, the transitions in narrative mode between psycho-narration and narrated monologue are often blurred and at times occur mid-sentence (Enid: "She decided that Chipper was exactly like his father – *at once hungry and impossible to feed. He turned food into shame.*"). The hyphen separates the latter part of the sentence from the psycho-narration marked by the cognitive verb "decided," indicating a shift into narrated monologue. In these last two examples, punctuation (the hyphen) and line break (the paragraph break) act as rhythmic and visual cues.

The quoted passage is a condensed example of narrative shifts in mode and perspective in *The Corrections* between possible constellations of figural and authorial as well as internal and external perspectives, and even though most of the chapters follow the consciousness of

one character for longer stretches at a time, it is an accurate illustration of the particular narrative technique pursued in the overall novel. As in *Gilead*, it is the indirect rendering of consciousness in *The Corrections* that effectively evokes depth beyond the surface of representation and thus a seemingly sincere transparency of the figural mind. The effect is achieved by seeing the characters from outside (from the perspective of the narrator as well as the other characters) and from within (with varying degrees of distance depending on the narrative mode). The shift between an external view on a particular character – figural or authorial – (Enid: "Chipper was exactly like his father") and an internal view of that particular character (Chip: "*refusal had a flavor for which a taste could be acquired*") appears seamless, with the result that the internal figural perspective appears all the more transparent. Figural perspective in this case, however, does not mean – as with direct speech in drama or quoted monologue in prose – that the wording necessarily approximates the character's speech. On the contrary, in the dinner scene, the figural consciousness of Chipper presented in psycho-narration, mediated by the authorial voice, is clearly tinted by knowledge of the grown Chip: "Even at the age of seven Chipper intuited that this feeling of futility would be a fixture of his life. A dull waiting and then a broken promise, a panicked realization of how late it was" (305). This allusion to a grown Chip that the reader has already encountered in the earlier chapter "The Failure," however, does not diminish the believability or reliability of the figural perspective. The sincerity of the narrative perspective does not reside in a mimetic representation of speech pattern, an imitation of figural idiom, but in an imitation of interiority, of figural consciousness.

James Wood remarks that Franzen "is at his finest when being ambitious and even theoretical about the soul" (*Irresponsible* 201). Indeed, the inner life is what Franzen attempts to represent in *The Corrections*. The internal focalization and particular narrative mode of the novel evoke for the reader a sense of transparency, of unmediated access to the characters' mental states. Thus the Lamberts can be characterized – as fictional characters on the level of

content – as morally insincere in the sense that they hold back their true feelings, hide their true intentions from each other and struggle with the incongruity of their inner and outer selves. However, the narrative itself – on the level of mode and perspective – is rhetorically sincere in the sense that the reader is granted seemingly unmediated access to the figures' innermost – petty, vulnerable, and often spiteful – thoughts and feelings. The moral insincerity of the figures toward each other only heightens the effect of narrative sincerity toward the reader. It is in this communication of interiority for the sake of a "deep connection" – the representation of the inner life of a character – that Franzen locates the purpose of literature ("David Foster Wallace" 164).

III.2.2 Unveiling the Chronotopological Structure of *The Corrections*

Staged Opacity

Candor – paradoxically – can be achieved only indirectly through a careful orchestration of significations. Thereby, a particular rhetorical form creates an effect of transparency that is subsequently perceived as sincerity. In *The Corrections*, this effect is further upheld by the interplay of the apparent transparency with a staged opacity: First, opacity is created to make the narrative discourse appear non-transparent and next, it is dispelled in an act of unveiling that makes what is presented appear as nudity or interiority. The frequent shifts in narrative mode and perspective in *The Corrections* achieve this effect through the contrast of an external and an internal view of the novel's characters. The most apparent opacity of *The Corrections*, however, is the seeming chronotopological disorder of the narrative structure. Yet, although the opening paragraph announces "[t]he madness of an autumn prairie cold front coming through" and with it "[g]ust after gust of disorder" (3), the novel's structure is far from the "loose organization" (Green 107) that critics have attributed to it. Susanne Rohr, for example, argues that the chronology of the novel has been "replaced by mere contiguity" (95). I agree with this assessment only to the extent that the novel creates a semblance of disorder that is resolved both continuously – through the gradual addition of storylines and perspectives – and periodically – through instances of resolution or clarity, which can be described as narrative unveiling.

To support her argument, Rohr analyzes Franzen's use of listing – a formal device that the author also employs in his preceding novels (Burn, *Franzen* 30), specifically "his wild, disturbing assemblage of the shopping bag" in the opening chapter, "St. Jude," as a *mise en abyme* for the "deep structure" of the text – or its lack thereof (Rohr 96). The passage in question gives a summary in list-form of Enid's domestic life:

> […] in the succession of forced migrations and deportations any lingering semblance of order was lost, and so the random Nordstrom shopping bag that was camped behind a dust ruffle with one of its plastic handles semi-detached would contain the whole shuffled pathos of a refugee existence – non-consecutive issues of *Good Housekeeping*, black-and-white snapshots of Enid in the 1940s, brown recipes on high-acid paper that called for wilted lettuce, the current month's telephone and gas bills, the detailed first notice from the medical lab instructing co-payers to ignore subsequent billings for less than fifty cents, a complimentary cruise ship photo of Enid and Alfred wearing leis and sipping beverages from hollow coconuts, and the only extant copies of two of their children's birth certificates, for example." (*The Corrections* 7)

MaryAnn Snyder-Körber, however, claims elsewhere that no reader could possibly mistake these "assemblage[s]" for "garbage without purpose" (48, my translation). She argues that the determinative principles of the novel are synecdochal – charged with meaning – rather than purely contiguous relationships. In her reading of the opening chapter's description of the cluttered Ping-Pong table in the Lamberts' basement, the listed objects take on particular symbolic meanings and functions within the narrative (48).[136] The passage in question continues the domestic history of Enid and Alfred as a couple:

> It's the fate of most Ping-Pong tables in home basements eventually to serve the ends of other, more desperate games. After Alfred retired he appropriated the eastern end of the table for his banking and correspondence. At the western end was the portable color TV on which he'd intended to watch the local news while sitting in his great blue chair but which was now fully engulfed by *Good Housekeeping*s and the seasonal candy tins and baroque but cheaply made candle holders that Enid never quite found time to transport to the Nearly New consignment shop. The Ping-Pong table was the one field on which the civil war raged openly. At the eastern end Alfred's calculator was ambushed by floral print pot-holders and souvenir coasters from the Epcot Center and a device for pitting cherries which Enid had owned for thirty years and never used, while he, in turn, at the western end, for absolutely no reason that Enid could ever fathom, ripped to pieces a wreath made of pinecones and spray-painted filberts and brazil nuts. (*The Corrections* 8)

While these lists of objects appear without deep structure, they synecdochally reproduce the family conflict, and the family conflict in turn reproduces a larger social conflict (Snyder-Körber 8), as the geographical designation of the "eastern end" and the "western end" sug-

[136] "The tin cans and women's magazines might be clutter, but the reader would never assume them to be garbage without purpose. Their sprawling dissuades the husband from his recreational activities. His answer to the junk's skillful maneuvering is a massacre of the Christmas wreath" (Snyder-Körber 48, my translation).

gests.[137] Comparable to these examples of the text's material clutter, the seeming contiguity of the novel's chronotopological structure – determined, as already discussed, by multiple analepses and shifts in perspective – is the effect of an accurately orchestrated opacity. This opacity is strategically lifted in the course of the novel to evoke a sudden transparency of the narrative and, by extension, its sincerity.

Contrary to initial impressions, the formal structure of *The Corrections* follows a complex and interwoven overarching design. Chronologically, the novel is built around the moment of Alfred's fall from the cruise ship in the fourth of the seven chapters: The other chapters either lead up to or begin with Alfred's fall and its aftermath, excluding the brief exposition and coda (Burn, *Franzen* 106–07).[138] The novel's multilayered structure is further shaped by the insertion of Chinese box-like analepses[139] and topological shifts in focalization of the novel's characteristic multiperspectivity. These frequent changes in time frame and perspective endow the novel with a semblance of disorder and arbitrariness, and yet, the novel follows a definite, rather than associative, chronotopological layout. In an interview, Franzen likened the structure of *The Corrections* to that of complex arrangements in modern classical music, so-called new music:

[137] "The war between the aging husband and wife is initially a conflict in microcosm that soon and without much effort becomes apparent as symptomatic for a discomfort on a larger scale. The arrangement on the table is geographically accurate: unusual for a playing field but not for larger geographical entities, such as countries or continents. Franzen employs the Lambert family as a synecdoche of the larger social context" (Snyder-Körber 48, my translation).

[138] Chronologically chapters two ("The Failure"), three ("The More He Thought About it The Angrier He Got"), and four ("At Sea") lead up to the patriarch's fall and roughly end there (both chapter three and four on Tuesday, October 5th, chapter two on Saturday, October 2nd). Chapter five ("The Generator") tells the story beyond the fall (Monday, December 22nd) and chapter six ("One Last Christmas") ends in early January. The last chapter ("The Corrections") ends two years later. Stephen J. Burn has devised a graphic illustration of the chronological structure of the novel (*Franzen* 102).

[139] Burn draws up a graph to illustrate the temporal structure of the second chapter, "The Failure": The x-axis maps the progress of narrated time along the day that serves as present to the chapter (Saturday, October 2nd), and the y-axis maps the points in narrative time according to the analepses spanning a time frame from when Chip was 33 to when he was 39. The resulting graph shows a line that dips and rises, revealing the depth, length, and temporal location of each analepsis as the narrative progresses. The shape is that of several dips of varying depth enclosed within the present of the chapter (Burn, *Franzen* 105). A similar graph could be produced for each of the novel's chapters, revealing the structure to follow a specific chronotopological layout rather than be determined by contiguous disorder.

> [...] the most important music for *The Corrections* was probably *Petrushka*, the Stravinsky ballet. *Petrushka* corresponded not only to the feeling I was after but to the structure, too, the relation of tonally disparate parts to an ultimately unified whole. I also kept coming back to Steve Reich's *Music for 18 Musicians* as a model for the kind of metaphoric layering and interconnection I was after. (qtd. in Burn, "Art of Fiction" 71)

Petrushka is directly alluded to in *The Corrections* when Chip makes use of the "sixteen joyful bars" of the ballet's "Dance of the Coachmen and Grooms" for a Lithuanian scam-website he is administering (*The Corrections* 504). Igor Fyodorovich Stravinsky's 1911 ballet is characterized by its pioneering use of a bitonality device, the so-called "Petrushka chord" (Taruskin, "Petrushka" 94). Steve Reich's *Music for 18 Musicians*, on the other hand, is an example of musical minimalism. Premiered in 1976, the composition has a cyclical structure built from eleven chords, each chord surrounded by its own smaller piece of music. In this piece, an important stylistic device is the augmentation of each chord played by a single player through the ensemble's simultaneous deconstruction of this chord. Eventually, each smaller composition – like beads on a string – returns to the larger cycle (Taruskin, "Harmonious" 383). Both of these musical references can be understood as analogies of Franzen's narrative methods in *The Corrections*.[140]

The so-called Petrushka chord illustrates Franzen's technique of combining "tonally disparate parts" (Franzen qtd. in Burn, "Art of Fiction" 71). Stravinsky's bitonality device is a metaphor for the contradictions that arise between the characters' different perspectives in *The Corrections*. The comparison of the novel to the compositional structure of *Music for 18 Musicians* reveals the ostensible disorder of the novel to be based on a specific order: The five characters of the novel can be understood in analogy to the eleven chords in Reich's piece. Each character has a particular consciousness and story that is unfolded in a separate chapter

[140] Susanne Rohr employs a more classical musical analogy to describe the novel's formal structure, which does not fully account, however, for the effects of unifying atonality and orchestrated obscurity/revelation: "[…] in its formal organization the novel resembles a classic symphony: the St. Jude exposition introduces major themes and subjects, which are then executed and enlarged in the various movements of the development. The recapitulation then orchestrates the various thematic elements until the final coda echoes the exposition and sketches out the final pattern" (101).

(except for the elderly Lamberts, who share their central chapter). Framed by an exposition and a coda, these five chapters appear as autonomous pieces; yet, as in Reich's composition, each character is subject to an augmentation through the ensemble. As in *Music for 18 Musicians*, each chapter returns to the larger cycle of the novel. The effect is one of interconnectedness, regardless of the disorderly appearance. The seamless shifts between characters' perspectives in *The Corrections* further contribute to the "metaphoric layering" in the novel and also relate to the musical analogies (Franzen qtd. in Burn, "Art of Fiction" 71). The principle of contiguity is interwoven with the principle of similarity in the instances where one sentence can be attributed to several characters' consciousness (as in the dinner example cited above) or when the characters' inner monologues betray family resemblance in terms of theme and language, particularly between Chip and Alfred.[141] This ambiguity of focalization, caught between two characters' consciousness, can be likened to *Petrushka*'s bitonality. The shifts between psycho-narration and narrated monologue – between "the narrator's discourse about a character's consciousness" and "a character's mental discourse in the guise of the narrator's discourse" (Cohn 14) – can be further likened to the augmentation and simultaneous deconstruction of the single player's chord through the ensemble in *Music for 18 Musicians*: For one, the perspective on a chapter's main character oscillates between a figural and an authorial as well as an inner and an external view; for another, the narrator subtly and implicitly comments on the characters' mental discourse through dissonant psycho-narration (as in the above-cited example of Gary feeling unappreciated).

The seemingly disparate elements of the novel – both chronological (i.e., the nested analepses) and topological (i.e., the shifting perspectives) – are therefore subject to an under-

[141] Family resemblance is a reoccurring moment in the novel, whether explicitly (e.g., Chip's girlfriend accuses him of being like his father Alfred, Alfred confronts Gary with their similar conjugal circumstances and the depression they both suffer from) or implicitly (e.g., Alfred perceives his hands as disobedient children, Chip's eyes are likened to skipping children, both Chip and Alfred scramble letters in words to mean different things, such as "crepuscular" 12–13, "filth avenue" 117, "gal pathetic" 120).

lying narrative design: Rather than being blown apart by "[g]ust after gust of disorder" as the novel's introductory sentences suggest (3), the individual strands of the novel gradually form a "unified whole" (Franzen qtd. in Burn, "Art of Fiction" 71). The orchestrated disorder thereby serves as a semblance of opacity that can be cleared – unveiled – to evoke the sincerity of the narrative.

Narrative Unveiling

The principal technique in *The Corrections* that can be identified as representational sincerity is that of dispelling a strategically created structural opacity through shifts in chronology and perspective to produce an effect of narrative unveiling. Initially, a situation described or alluded to in the text provokes a calculated misunderstanding or a misjudgment by the reader, based on the information available at this point in the narrative. Subsequently, this misjudgment is corrected and revealed as an opacity that has been dispelled. These instances of narrative unveiling can be small retardations resolved within a couple of pages, such as Enid's trouble with a Medicare bill. Enid tries to "make sense of a threatening Third Notice from a medical lab that demanded immediate payment of $ 0.22 while simultaneously showing an account balance of $ 0.00 […] and in any case offering no address to which remittance might be made" (Franzen, *The Corrections* 6). One page later, the narrator lists – amid other clutter collected in a "random Nordstrom shopping bag […] camped behind a dust ruffle" – "the detailed First Notice from the medical lab instructing co-payers to ignore subsequent billings for less than fifty cents" (7). The early introduction of this technique of subtly correcting the narrative through a gradual dispersal of information within the opening chapter establishes its subsequent application throughout the novel. More often, these corrective moments are somewhat extended episodes, as, for example, in the second chapter when Chip Lambert is introduced as wearing leather clothes and a "wrought-iron rivet" in his ear (17). The reader

registers the old Lambert couple's surprise over a presumable change in their son's appearance ("Those aren't leather are they?"; "What's that – wrought iron?" 20, 21), but the narrative significance of this change remains opaque until considerably later in the chapter when, in an analepsis, Chip is "b[uying] leather clothes and h[aving] his ears pierced" (100) as a reaction to the termination of his contract as an English professor due to sexual misconduct with an undergraduate student.

Such corrective instances are numerous and vary both in the narrative and narrated time they bridge and in the relevance they have for the understanding of the story. Burn observes that this narrative technique, to which he refers as "narrative corrections" (*Franzen* 101), reveals "causal connection[s]" rather than incidental ones (103), thereby leading the reader to reevaluate the initial scene as motivated rather than purely incidental. Burn stresses the didactic potential of this narrative technique "by revealing the reader's tendency to make premature judgments from partial data" (104). While I agree with the assessment that this narrative technique has the potential for moral correction, leading the reader to reevaluate their previous understanding of the story, I want to shift the focus to the rhetorical strategy that this effect is based on, namely that of unveiling: A calculated narrative opacity is dispelled, revealing to the reader the relevance of the episode in question for the larger narrative. In a prominent example of this technique, Enid, sitting with her son in a taxi from the airport, makes a seemingly unmotivated remark that Chip smells of fish: "'Does anybody smell fish, though?' 'We are near the ocean,' Chip said. 'No, it's you.' Enid leaned and buried her face in Chip's leather sleeve. 'Your jacket smells *strongly* of fish.' He wrenched free of her. 'Mother. Please'" (Franzen, *The Corrections* 22, emphasis in original). Taken for itself, this episode characterizes a stereotypical relationship between mother and son: she meddlesome, he withdrawn. The origin of the smell, however, remains unclear to the reader until later in the same chapter: In an ensuing analepsis, 86 pages later, Chip is stealing a fish he cannot otherwise

afford, smuggling it out of the supermarket underneath his clothes: "He dropped to one knee and touched his bootlaces and took the salmon right up inside his leather jacket and underneath his sweater and tucked the sweater into his pants and stood up again" (108). The chronotopological structure is thereby designed in a manner to unveil the narrative and reveal what can be conceived of as the true meaning of the episode for the whole narrative. The carefully crafted effect, besides a critical reevaluation of what has been previously assumed to be the meaning of the initial scene in the taxi,[142] is one of going beyond appearances, of "looking past surfaces" – a habit Jonathan Franzen claims that novelists preserve ("Why Bother" 90).

The novel's narrative unveilings collectively effect the impression of having been deceived and this deception being lifted. In *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Transparency and Obstruction* (1971), Jean Starobinski develops a "theory of unveiling" (73–80) that understands unveiling to take place in two stages: The first stage reveals the presence of the veil; the second stage reveals the 'truth' behind it. The "first unveiling is a critical act: deceptively seductive appearances are dispelled […]. Men become aware of having been deceived"; although "they know nothing else, […] already a liberation has taken place. […] Before attacking what is behind the veil, [unveiling] denounces the veil's own presence" (73). Accordingly, in *The Corrections* the unveiling of the narrative "does not alter the reality" of the story, but rather "eradicates errors rooted in [the representation of] that reality" (73). This means that the story is not changed retroactively, the narrative discourse is not contradicted; rather, a shift in perspective adds information at a more advanced point in the narrative and corrects the previous appearance. At this moment, it is the opacity, the veil itself, which becomes visible to the reader. The most extended narrative unveiling of the novel, with the highest relevance for the story as a whole, is that of the daughter Denise's so-called betrayal, following the narrative

[142] Burn argues that the reevaluation consists mainly in a shift of the reader's ethical scrutiny from Enid to Chip (*Franzen* 103).

pattern of a staged opacity and gradual unveiling to produce an effect of transparency, intimate insight, and therefore sincerity.

Having lived at home after graduating from high school, Denise had a secret affair with one of Alfred's co-workers at Midland Pacific railroad called Don Armour – one of several speaking names in the novel – that led to Alfred's early retirement (inexplicable to the rest of the family) and consequently to shortages in his pension, forming the basis for lasting family disputes. Allusions to this affair – referred to in passages focalized through Alfred repeatedly as "the betrayal" – are made early in the novel: Reflecting on "the final breakdown of the signal system" (a metaphor for his affliction with Parkinson's disease), Alfred is reminded that "[t]he betrayal had begun in Signals," a department of the Midland Pacific railroad (Franzen, *The Corrections* 78). Later in the novel, a reference is made to Alfred's unexplained resignation:

> These irresistible arguments appeared to sway Alfred, but three nights later he came home and announced to Enid that he'd tendered his resignation that afternoon and that Creel had accepted it. Alfred was then seven weeks short of a full year at his last, largest salary; it made no sense at all to quit. But he gave no explanation, then or ever, to Enid or to anyone else, for his sudden turnabout. He simply said: I have made my decision. (176)

At this stage in the narrative the reader does not know about Denise' affair or that Alfred has discovered his daughter's betrayal and that this discovery has provoked the decision to retire early. The narrative unveiling takes place more than 400 pages later when Denise, following a conversation with her by then severely demented father, discovers a heart Don Armour had etched into Alfred's basement workbench years earlier[143] and connects it to his early retire-

[143] The structural centrality of the betrayal for the novel as a whole is illustrated by the six separate invocations of benches in the novel, leading up to Alfred's workbench. At some point in the story, each character sits down on an explicitly evoked bench: Chip in a park to procrastinate, Gary and Denise in a corporate courtyard to discuss family affairs, Enid under deck of the cruise ship to break into tears, Alfred on deck of the cruise ship to withdraw. These benches lead up to the one in front of Alfred's workplace, on which Denise has her first conversation with her lover Don Armour. The affair eventually leads to the climactic bench – Alfred's basement workbench – on which Don leaves a message scratched into the wood for Alfred to discover. This also illustrated how elaborately orchestrated the appearance accessibility is in *The Corrections*.

ment (602–603). The allusions made to the betrayal throughout the novel, focalized through Alfred, remain opaque to the reader but – in Starobinski's terms – "denounce[] the veil's own presence" (73). This is the case, for example, when Alfred concludes that because Denise "witnessed such [hostile] scenes of marriage" when still in the womb, "when she was older, she betrayed him" (323).

The most prominent allusion to the betrayal takes place in the form of a hallucination on the cruise ship in chapter four: "In the meantime the officer had flushed, and as he turned from his urinal Alfred recognized his blue cheeks and rose-tinted eyeglasses, his pudenda-pink lips. […] He said, 'I left a little treasure in your bed, Mr. Lambert. To replace the one I took'" (383). The significant details here – as in the following passages – are the "blue cheeks" of the 'offender':

> Alfred had recognized the blue-cheeked man in the bathroom as the man from Signals, as betrayal personified. But the blue-cheeked man from Signals couldn't possibly afford a luxury cruise, and this worried him. The blue-cheeked man came from the distant past but was walking and talking in the present […]. (384)

Again, the reader cannot deduce meaning from these allusions, which appear at this point in the narrative to be symptoms of Alfred's growing dementia,[144] until in the subsequent chapter, "The Generator," the affair is recounted from Denise's perspective: "Don Armour was the only man in Signals who seemed not to love Denise. He was a solidly built, short-legged Vietnam vet whose cheeks, close-shaved, were nearly as blue and glaucous as a plum" (410–411). While the scene on board the cruise ship involving "the blue-cheeked man from Signals" is unveiled 25 pages later for the benefit of the reader, revealing Alfred's obsessions to have a basis in "the distant past" and thus a rational foundation, the mystery of Alfred's early

[144] For example, an extended passage in the novel recounts the dialogue between Alfred and "the turd," the old man's vision of his feces come to life (325–31). Bearing in mind Franzen's education in German literature, this passage can further be regarded as an intertextual reference to the picaresque novel *Simplicius Simplicissimus* written in 1668 by Hans Jakob Christoffel von Grimmelshausen, in which a piece of toilet paper argues with the protagonist.

retirement and resignation remains unresolved for the other characters, including Denise, who, for most of the narrative, believes her affair with the "blue-cheeked man" to have remained a secret to her father.

This form of dramatic irony where the reader possesses more information about the action than all or some of the figures in the novel (Pfister 88) is characteristic of narrative unveiling in Franzen's novel: Sincerity is enacted strictly as representational sincerity on the level of narrative form, and never as personal sincerity on the level of the characters. Performed as dramatic irony, unveiling in the novel is therefore directed not at the characters but at the reader. On a larger scale, all of the analepses in the novel function as narrative unveiling and thus representational sincerity, revealing causal rather than incidental relations between seemingly disparate elements and actions in the novel, lifting layer after layer of opacity – recognizable as such only in the moment of unveiling – through the strategic insertion of additional information about the characters and their storylines in small portions. The dramatic irony of narrative unveiling is not resolved in *The Corrections*, with the exception of the betrayal. At the end of the penultimate chapter, which brings the five Lamberts together in terms of both setting (the family home) and perspective (through multiple focalization, shifting between the family members), Denise learns of Alfred's knowledge of her affair with his co-worker and the effects it has had on her family (599–600). This, however, does not so much constitute an instance of personal sincerity, as it is a *mise en abyme* of the novel's narrative sincerity: Alfred, naked from the waist down after having soiled himself due to his severe affliction with Parkinson's disease, confronts Denise with his knowledge of her affair (600).[145] Denise – repeatedly portrayed as an avid reader (e.g., 91 and 421) – becomes the reader's alter ego as they simultaneously witness the literal and figurative unveiling of the patriarch and his secret.

[145] This scene is an intertextual reference to Franz Kafka's *Das Urteil*. In his biographical essay collection, *The Discomfort Zone*, Franzen refers to his study of German modernist literature, in particular Kafka's *Der Prozess* and Rainer Maria Rilke's *Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge* (133ff.).

Based on the frequent allusions to the betrayal and the dramatic gravity of its resolution at the novel's end, one could argue that Denise's affair and the ultimate revelation of Alfred's knowledge of it constitute the central plot points of the novel – secrets to be revealed to the reader through a series of narrative unveilings. The conflict and its resolution, however, remain conspicuously ambiguous. While the reader is granted intimate insight into Alfred's depressed consciousness in some instances, this is not the case with the betrayal. What is therefore unveiled is the causal relation of the events in the novel – Alfred's knowledge of his daughter's affair led to his early retirement, long-term financial losses and familial disharmony. The motivation behind Alfred's actions, however, remains largely opaque. It could be an oedipal question of the patriarch's desire for his own daughter – the "little treasure" (383) that the other man took from him – that makes it impossible for him to tolerate the affair. Alfred's compulsive desire for a group of cheerleaders, approximately his daughter's age, suggests as much (322). Alternatively, it could be a matter of bourgeois pride that makes an affair with one of the workers that Alfred holds in contempt unforgivably offensive. Taking her to her first day of work at his company, Alfred warns Denise about "the men" and their lack of work ethic (408). Or perhaps his jealousy is not directed at the teenage daughter, but rather at the middle-aged colleague, as father and daughter's similarly worded, sensuous descriptions of Don Armour suggest. Alfred, coming upon an apparition of Armour on the cruise ship, recognizes "his blue cheeks and rose-tinted eyeglasses, his pudenda-pink lips" (383), and Denise describes him as a man "whose cheeks, close-shaved, were nearly as blue and glaucous as a plum" (410–11). The "pudenda-pink lips" carry an unmistakable sexual connotation, and the alliteration with "plum" in Denise's description further supports both Lamberts' sexual attraction to the man. No narrated monologue or passage of psycho-narration, however, gives an unequivocal answer to this puzzle. Alfred's mind remains opaque to the narrator and the reader.

Correspondingly, Starobinski's theory accounts for a second stage of unveiling: "The second unveiling comes as the complement and continuation of the first. If the first stage is the denunciation of the veil itself, the second will be the discovery and description of what remains hidden from our eyes. Once error is dissipated, we come face to face with solid reality" (74). After the initial deception has become apparent to the reader, the underlying truth can be exhumed. However, as Starobinski is quick to point out, this conception of truth as something solid, waiting to be unveiled, is "an image employed in a naïvely optimistic manner, which pretends to see the true visage behind the mask, to grasp the 'thing in itself,' to touch the reality behind the appearance, the substance beyond the accident" (74). "The only truth accessible to us," Starobinski claims, "is in our ideas or sensations or sentiments […]" (75). What the text unveils in the case of the betrayal is therefore not the truth, but rather another layer of signification interpreted as truth; a truth that is irreducibly subjective and flexible, endowed with the reader's knowledge and experience. Consequently, sincerity does not reveal truth or interiority; it performs it through a rhetorical evocation of transparency and unveiling. Sincerity can therefore be understood to acknowledge social masks and the ultimate and fundamental inaccessibility of whatever lies behind them. However, it does so not to encourage alienation, but to enable connection.

III.2.3. Sincere Masks: A Means to an End

Sincerity encompasses rhetorical techniques that evoke a "true visage behind the mask" (Starobinski 74). But while *The Corrections*' narrative sincerity evokes a "looking past surfaces" (Franzen, "Why Bother" 90), the text simultaneously exhibits the contingency and provisional quality of truth and the necessity of masks for articulations of the self. This notion of depth as consisting of yet another layer figures prominently in the novel's central instance of an opaque truth and its unveiling, namely the event all seven chapters of the novel are orchestrated around – the patriarch's fall into the ocean from the deck of a cruise ship:

> Came another cloud then, larger, denser, that turned the gulf below it to a greenish black. Ship and shadow in collision.
>
> And shame and despair—
>
> Or was it the wind catching the sail of his raincoat?
>
> Or was it the ship's pitching?
>
> Or the tremor in his legs?
>
> Or the corresponding tremor of the engines?
>
> Or a fainting spell?
>
> Or vertigo's standing invitation?
>
> Or the relative warmth of open water's invitation to someone soaked and freezing in the wind?
>
> Or was he leaning, deliberately, to glimpse again the gingery mons? (*The Corrections* 385–386)

The narrative does not give a definitive answer to the question of why Alfred goes overboard. Instead, the selective omniscient narrator suggests one answer after the other, phrasing them as questions and negating them through each subsequent suggestion. This enumeration of possible reasons for Alfred's fall constitutes a series of unveilings, revealing layer after layer of 'truth', each revelation discrediting the preceding one, and thus exposing the rhetorical

character of transparency, the "nudity of form" (Peyre 313), and sincerity as well as the provisional and contingent character of the truth revealed. The "true visage behind the mask" (Starobinski 74) cannot be represented, and remains inaccessible behind the doubtful propositions of the narrative voice.

Another narrative strategy Franzen employs to call attention to the mask-like quality of his writing is to selectively undermine the realist illusion of his narrative. Stephen Burn has pointed out that elements such as the "willfully obscured names" of entities in *The Corrections* (such as D-College or W-Corporation) as well as the "implausibly childish names" of minor characters and supernumerary figures (such as Mayor Goode of Nicetown) serve to "self-consciously draw attention to the book's artifice" (*Franzen* 128). As discussed above, Franzen refers to Rilke's text to illustrate the unavoidable character of masks:

> *Malte* is essentially the story of a young writer working through a fear of masks to a recognition of their necessity. Rilke anticipated the postmodern insight that there is no personality, there are just these various intersecting fields: that personality is socially constructed, genetically constructed, linguistically constructed, constructed by upbringing. Where the postmoderns go wrong is in positioning a nullity behind all that. It's not a nullity, it's something raw and frightening and bottomless [...]. To ignore it is to deny your humanity. (qtd. in Burn, "Art of Fiction" 51–52)

The conviction that no ontological certainty can ever be achieved and that everything – including the self – is subject to social construction, but that this human condition can and should be, if not overcome, then at least appeased by the acceptance of masks – be they artistic form or social role –, forms the epistemological basis to the employment of narrative sincerity in Franzen's literary work. Sincerity in *The Corrections* thus comprises an acknowledgement of the representational surface not as superficiality or dissimulation but as a necessity, as a prerequisite for any type of interaction and communication. Sincerity as a rhetorical technique of literature requires trust in the literary surface. Surfaces might be deceptive, but the "solid reality" (Starobinski 74) behind them consists of yet another surface. Participating

in literary sincerity therefore means to carefully read textual surfaces, not for the absolute meaning that they veil, but for the provisional meaning that they unveil.

In summary: In Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections,* the rhetorical strategy of sincerity primarily consists of a representation of interiority, the writing of inner lives. The carefully orchestrated oscillation between viewpoints internal and external to the five characters creates the "prolonged and deep inside views" that effect sincerity (Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* 377–78). Whereas the narrated monologue in *The Corrections* functions to blur the line between narrative voice and figural consciousness (thereby diminishing the narrative distance and evoking a low degree of mediation), the psycho-narration appears to reveal a layer of figural consciousness to the reader (by conspicuously crossing beyond the character's self-awareness) that the character himself might be unaware of or unwilling to share. The continued creation and dissolution of a subtle distance between the reader and the characters evokes a transparency of mind characteristic of literary sincerity. The strategy of narrative unveiling also creates sincerity: By first producing a strategic opacity through the artful manipulation of the chronotopological structure and then gradually dispelling this opacity, the novel evokes an unveiling of the narrative truth. The accessibility of *The Corrections* thus becomes evident as a complex rhetorical effect rather than merely a reduction of complexity. The mask, seemingly opposed to the concept of sincerity (perceived as transparent representation), becomes its metaphor: As a metonymy of the self, the mask articulates what can otherwise not be represented and thereby allows for social interaction and connection between otherwise isolated individuals. The mask conspicuously retains its unfulfilled promise of a look behind the mask. In *The Corrections*, this inherent potential for removal is staged through instances of narrative unveiling. Yet, because the (literary) mask is indispensable for communication and interaction – a "middle ground" upon which "to make a deep connection with another human being"

(Franzen, "David Foster Wallace" 164) – each attempt at its removal in the novel remains an empty gesture, each instance revealing another layer of signification but never the truth.

IV Conclusion: New Sincerity – New Realism

> "[T]he new realism is not just a naïve conservative backlash to postmodern daring and innovation, but a new type of writing with its own potential for contributing to our contemporary cultural situation."
>
> Winfried Fluck, "Surface and Depth: Postmodernism and Neo-Realist Fiction" (1992)

The so-called renaissance of family fiction articulates a desire for reconnection after postmodernism, a reconnection between reader and writer as well as between individuals and social institutions. The rhetorical strategy for this reconnection takes the form of literary sincerity, an intentional and communicative rhetorical form that produces trust through a seeming transparency of representation. Analyzing two paradigmatic examples of the renaissance of family fiction, I have located this narrative strategy on the content level (i.e., the intimate realm of family as literary subject, the associated recognition of familiar events and bourgeois material detail as well as characteristic tropes of sincerity, such as death/loss, love, childhood, old age/illness, and autobiographical detail) and especially on the formal level of the novels in question (i.e., in the employment of family as a seemingly transparent order for the production of meaning maintained through tacit knowledge, in the evocation of a particularly plain- or accessible-seeming style, as well as in the manipulation of narrative mode and perspective to offer insight into the characters' "hearts and minds" (Franzen, "Farther Away" 51). The renaissance of the family novel is thereby part of a larger return to literary realism in North American literature since the 1980s (cf. Leypoldt).[146] However, the realism of the early post-millennial period differs from the classical realism of the nineteenth century as well as from the neorealism of the late twentieth century. A brief overview of the critical discussion of neo-

[146] Mark Shechner begins his discussion of the return of literary realism in the 1990s with the assurance that "realism was always there and always had its practitioners and defenders. John Updike, Saul Bellow, William Styron, Philip Roth and Walker Percy have been major forces on the literary stage for four decades or so, and for one segment of the population, residing largely outside the academy, they have been the very scene itself. Younger writers picked up the novel much as they have found it, quite as though the techniques and strategies of realist fiction had never experienced challenge or been called into question" (30).

realism will illuminate these differences and, in so doing, also the character of the contemporary return to realism.

Neorealism

Thomas Claviez, in his introduction to a volume of the journal *Amerikastudien/American Studies* dedicated to "Neorealism – Between Innovation and Continuation" (2004), contrasts the two dominant critical positions toward new realism: The first appraises it as a reaction to a postmodern exhaustion that signals the end of experimental postmodernism, whereas the second understands the new realism to continue the (epistemological) tradition of postmodern writing and judges speaking of a return to be reductionist. "What, finally, is new about this thing called Neo-Realism," asks Claviez and offers the following answer: 'New' about neorealism is "that the metaphysical skepticism of postmodernism infuses, is combined, or even (intentionally or unintentionally) collides with, the formal language of realism," resulting in a referential literary form with an epistemology that does not sustain referentiality (9–11). Classical realism thereby ostensibly allowed for the reader's participation in the represented experience, whereas in neorealist works experience remains decontextualized and thus inaccessible to the reader. According to Claviez, a subversion of meaning is achieved through "effects of the uncanny" that are produced when "claims of representation" and "modes of representation" are contradictory (11). What this means is that the neorealist literary form offers the reader a representational surface that, via its ostensible referentiality, suggests meaning which it then refuses to provide.[147] In his article "Surface and Depth: Postmodernism and Neo-Realist Fiction" (1992), Winfried Fluck refers to this representation strategy as "defamiliarization" (72) and exemplifies it in the neorealist writing of Raymond Carver:

[147] Günter Leypoldt concurs that neorealism constitutes a continuation of the postmodern epistemology in its "lack of semantic depth" (27).

> Carver needs realism to establish a promise that provides his stories with potential meaning, and, thus, with interest. But his narrative technique of metonymic minimalism remains without a representative center or depth because the relation between sign and referent has become so unstable and transient that his signs are constantly placed in states of isolation and decontextualization. (78)

Further, the premise of the defamiliarization of realist literary texts is that this effect becomes more striking the more familiar the referential surface appears (Fluck 72; cf. Claviez 11). This hypothesis is convincing for the neorealism of Raymond Carver – even of Don DeLillo and Bret Easton Ellis – but seems to fall short of the realist works of contemporary authors of family fiction such as Marilynne Robinson and Jonathan Franzen.

In contrast to the neorealism of the late twentieth century, the contemporary realism of the so-called renaissance of family fiction, exemplified here in an analysis of Franzen's *The Corrections* and Robinson's *Gilead*, articulates dissatisfaction with the postmodern, *cul-de-sac* postulation of the impossibility of "deep knowledge" (Fluck 71). Yet the selected novels do not constitute a naïve return to a pre-linguistic-turn conception of stable meaning, but rather strive for meaning, notwithstanding the awareness of its inherent instability. For one, this rejection of a stable truth is indirectly upheld by the characteristic multiplicity of perspectives in contemporary family novels as well as by the frequent appearance of often contradictory sequels, such as the works of Robinson, Maile Meloy, Adam Langer, Alison Bechdel, and Carol Tyler. For another, the instability of signification is explicitly acknowledged within the novels, for example through the deferred explanation for Alfred Lambert's fall into the ocean in *The Corrections* as well as Ames' admission of the ultimate impenetrability of God and the minds of "those around us" in *Gilead* (233). Further, the concept of sincere communication entails the need for audience accommodation – the modification of the communicative form according to the specific needs of the addressee – and therefore a malleability of the communicated truth. As discussed, the concept of sincerity retains the notion of an ultimate incommunicability and instability of meaning, truth, and self while augmenting it with the pragma-

tism of communication necessary to maintain social relations. This is evident, for example, in Franzen's acknowledgement of the necessity of masks, social and literary, to "make visible and feelable the unsayable things inside" us (qtd. in Burn, "Art of Fiction" 50), as well as in Robinson's appeal to "imaginative love" to understand "what cannot be said." Literature, Robinson argues, offers "avenues of approach" to those "frontiers of the unsayable" for both readers and writers ("Imagination" 20–21). In this manner, rather than deepening the defamiliarization, the sincere realism of contemporary family fiction brings together the epistemologically problematic – the ultimate instability of meaning – with a social desire for a meaningful reconnection, after the deliberate uncertainty of postmodernism and during an ongoing crisis of moral as well as material values in the Western hemisphere.

Reestablishing Dialogue

This desire for sincere reconnection is evident in the non-fictional writing of the authors discussed – for example, Franzen's contract with the reader (cf. "Mr. Difficult") and Robinson's regret "that we have not done more to make the world intelligible to ourselves, and ourselves to the world" ("Introduction" 10), and in their fictional works. Although the characters' search for meaningful relationships with their family members could be taken as an indicator of this desire, the focus in this study has been on the sincerity of the narrative form – the novels' rhetorical strategy of sincerity. Fluck claims that the minimal realism of Raymond Carver's literary works poses an impenetrable surface to the reader (85). This, however, is not the case for the realism of contemporary North American family novels. On the contrary, these novels are composed to appear very much transparent and thus penetrable, offering an ostensibly unrestricted insight into the "hearts and minds" of the characters (Franzen, "Farther Away" 51). The representational surfaces of family novels are not decontextualized, but rather acquire their meaning from the context of family life – maintained through tacit

knowledge – and the depiction of a similarly recognizable and charged bourgeois domestic materiality. While neorealism is thus understood to "communicate the incommunicability of what is closest to the human heart" (Claviez 13), the realism of contemporary family fiction attempts to move beyond a performance of impossibility. It is employed as part of a rhetorical strategy of sincerity, meaning the ostensibly immediate representation or performance, for the benefit of an audience, of an emotional inner state on an outer surface that comes to appear transparent in the process. The effect is not one of defamiliarization or uncanniness, but of familiarity and recognition.

Thus, while Fluck demonstrates elsewhere that Modernism brought along "the dissolution of the model of reading based upon the model of dialogue" (qtd. in Claviez 13), the sincere rhetorical strategy of contemporary family fiction can be seen to reestablish reading as dialogue and as communal experience after postmodernism, as it were. Evidence for this claim is sincerity's social function – representing an emotional inner state with "a public end in view" (Trilling 10) – present, for example, in Jonathan Franzen's assertion that "[e]very writer is first a member of a community of readers" ("Mr. Difficult" 240). In *Gilead*, the protagonist John Ames writes to his son that "[w]e take fortuitous resemblances among us to be actual likenesses, because […] that really just allows us to coexist […]" (233–234). These "fortuitous resemblances" taken as "likenesses" are the representational outward manifestations of sincerity (mis)taken for the inners selves they represent. Therefore, rather than being satisfied with communicating incommunicability, contemporary realists acknowledge the "inviolable, untraversable, and utterly vast spaces between us" (Robinson, *Gilead* 234), but insist on the necessity of socio-aesthetic masks to "make visible and feelable the unsayable things inside" (Franzen qtd. Burn, "Art of Fiction" 50). They share a post-postmodern "sentimental dream of humane collective life" (Robinson, "Introduction" 30) and attempt to form a "middle ground on which to make a deep connection with another human being," through their literary writing

based on the trust brought about by rhetorical practices of sincerity (Franzen, "David Foster Wallace" 164).

Cycles of Referentiality and Anti-Referentiality

This post-postmodern turn to literary realism can be understood as the most recent pendulum swing in a cyclical movement between referentiality and anti-referentiality, from mimetic to anti-mimetic techniques of literary representation. Thereby, a period of referentiality in literature is regularly followed by a period of heightened self-referentiality. According to Heinz Ickstadt, the mimetic representational principles of nineteenth-century classical realism are followed by the anti-mimetic experiments of modernism, reacting to a rapidly changing socio-cultural environment of the *fin de siècle*, before the social crises of the 1930s induce another period of social realism. A second break from the mimetic principle takes place in the late 1950s in the shape of postmodernism, catalyzed by the social and political developments of the 1960s and 70s. Ickstadt proposes that a distinction between mimetic and anti-mimetic periods or principles, however, is not as simple as this generalizing overview might suggest (6–7). The historical changeability of so-called doxa – "ideological forms of social knowledge" (Prendergast 31) – allows for changing conceptions of what constitutes mimetic representation. Thus, as Roman Jakobson discusses in his essay "On Realism in Art" (1921), one realism may emerge in opposition to the last, allowing for the incorporation of elements previously deemed inadmissible or even anti-mimetic, such as the development of naturalism and psychological realism in contrast to classical realism or the expansion of mimetic representation by modernist language practice (Ickstadt 6–7). As Bradbury asserts, "most of the major movements that have been regarded as essentially anti-realist have argued that they are in effect a form of realism" (16). Vice versa, Ickstadt maintains that a reflection on the problematic of mimesis (i.e., the sign-character of language, the instable relationship of referent, signi-

fier, and signified) can be a part of realist representation, as it is a central element of the new realisms of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century (10).[148]

These transformations of representation have to be understood as embedded in socio-cultural processes. What therefore remains to be answered is the question concerning the origins of this renewed referentiality and of the so-called renaissance of family fiction, which have here been read as intertwined phenomena of a new sincerity. One reason for the latest return of the real can be identified as a heightened sense of crisis. As discussed above, socio-cultural instability can lead to a need for artistic reassurance through recognizable representational forms that produce trust and a sense of stability. Another reason can be found in the exhaustion with an over-theorized postmodern literature, which also expressed itself in the ideological disputes of the Culture Wars of the 1980s and 90s (Green 6, Ickstadt 9). Postmodern literature, particularly the white and male type,[149] was thereby accused of neglecting the social and anthropological dimensions of literature, such as the human need for verisimilitude, reflecting and establishing a connection to the world and the transformation of a private experience into a public one (Claviez 7). Mark Shechner cites pressures from "below," "outside," or "the margin" catalyzing the "flowering of realism", referring to the desire of so-called minority literatures "to be heard outside their own communities" and to realism as "the medium for new voices" (30–32). Yet another reason is the weakening of the subject position as one of cultural authority through poststructuralist theory and discourse. Accordingly, the current cycle of representation is accompanied by a "post-poststructuralist turn to subjectivity" (Amanda Anderson 172). Sincerity, thereby, is the performance of subjectivity: As a performance –

[148] Christopher Prendergast demonstrates that even the most prototypically mimetic/realist texts encounter the limit of representation and that modern texts cannot be reduced to anti-mimetic procedures (15).
[149] In an article in *The Cambridge History of American Literature*, Wendy Steiner emphasizes the need to differentiate between the "experimental line of postmodernism and the broad heterogeneity of the postmodern period as a whole" when discussing 'postmodern' literature (Steiner 432) and warns that the synecdochal identification of the experimental neomodernists with postmodernity is a racially and gender-biased move of exclusion toward minority authors.

rather than an expression – of self, a self-presentation does not originate in subjectivity; on the contrary, subjectivity can be understood as a product of sincerity.

The new sincerity of North American letters at the beginning of the twenty-first century can thus be understood as an attempt to regain a subject position that, if not stable, is at least communicable. Jeremy Green describes the post-postmodern attempt to regain a (literary) subject-position as particularly problematic for the white/male/heterosexual subject:

> For the white male writer, in particular, the problem is one of finding a place and stance from which to speak and be heard in a competitive arena of other voices, given that his own identity, formerly naturalized by the prevailing climate of the literary world, is now exposed as a particularly privileged subject position. Equally, the white male middle-class, heterosexual viewpoint cannot be reclaimed as a subject worthy of close examination, without such an effort seeming like an assertion of privilege, a backlash against the great wealth and variety of fiction by minority writers. (9)

Consequently, Franzen regrets that,

> [w]orst of all, I'm *untribal*. Or rather, my personal *tribe of white American men* is too busy making money or being depressed over not making money to have time for tribal tales of business and depression. I have a suspicion, in fact, that my tribe was never much interested in *tales of itself*. ("More of the Same" n. pag., emphasis added)

From this perspective, Marilynne Robinson, Jonathan Franzen, and other white middle-class authors of post-postmodern family fiction can be understood to follow minority literature by recounting tales of their tribes, as it were, to which Wendy Steiner refers as a practice of "radical traditionalism" (441) and a "new kind of inclusion" (436). This practice of inclusion takes the shape of literary sincerity; a rhetorical strategy that includes the reader by ensuring the audience-specific recognizability of what is represented.

The family genre is thereby especially suited to articulating a renewed subject position within its social context because of the dialectical constellation within the family of an individual identity inseparable from its communal framework. When the domestic novel emerged in the eighteenth century, it not only gave rise to the social form of the modern family – pre-

ceding the way of life it represented – but also "the modern individual," allowing it "to become an economic and psychological reality" (Armstrong, *Desire* 8–9).[150] Consequently, the articulation of a (renewed) subject position through literary discourse connects the contemporary realists to those of the eighteenth century. Notably, the family novel is not the only eighteenth-century literary subgenre currently experiencing a renaissance: It seems appropriate to the post-postmodern literary undertaking of relocating the subject within a social context that, besides a renewed popularity of memoirs[151] (cf. Ribbat, "Memoirs"), many family novels either draw directly on the tradition of autobiographical writing,[152] incorporate autobiographical elements,[153] chose settings inviting an autobiographical interpretation,[154] or employ self-reflexive first-person narrators.[155] Both the autobiography and the epistolary novel are genres of subject formation, representing through their particular narrative conventions an inner self on an outer surface.

When left to hypothesize about this contemporary turn to eighteenth-century literary innovations – the family novel, the modern autobiography, and the epistolary novel as well as the rhetorical mode of literary sincerity itself – two parallels in socio-cultural development can be drawn: an increased complexity of public interaction and heightened mediation in communication in both periods (cf. Sennett; Habermas, "Public Sphere"). The public sphere as the realm of public opinion is managed not only through direct but particularly through indirect communication: "In a large public body this kind of communication requires specific means

[150] In his introduction to *Theory of the Novel: A Historical Approach* (2000), Michael McKeon similarly argues that the novel is directly associated with "the modern excavation of interiority as subjectivity, of character as personality and selfhood, and of plot as the progressive development of the integral individual" (xvi).
[151] Both Franzen and Robinson's non-fiction contains elements of autobiographical writing. Further, Franzen has published a memoir entitled *The Discomfort Zone* (2006).
[152] For example, Walls's *The Glass Castle* and *Half Broke Horses*, Eggers's *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, Flynn's *Another Bullshit Night in Suck City*, and Burroughs's *Running with Scissors* are composed as explicitly autobiographical family novels.
[153] For example, Hustvedt's *The Sorrows of an American* contains excerpts from her father's memoir; Flynn's *Another Bullshit Night in Suck City* contains excerpts from his father's letters.
[154] For example, Franzen's *The Corrections* being set in the author's native Midwest; O'Nan's *Wish You Were Here*, set at the lake Chautauqua, where the author – according to the book jacket – owns a summer home.
[155] For example, Lee's family novel *Aloft* (2004) or Eugenides' winding generational novel *Middlesex* (2002).

for transmitting information and influencing those who receive it. Today newspapers and magazines, radio and television are the media of the public sphere" (Habermas, "Public Sphere" 1571). To communicate reliability and overcome the distance and anonymity attributed to digital media, the trust-building rhetoric of sincerity – intentional and communicative, suggesting transparency and immediacy – becomes inevitable. These parallels between socio-cultural developments of the eighteenth century and the contemporary post-postmodern period play a part in the current rise of a new sincerity. Both the eighteenth-century literary forms of subject formation and the family novel of the early twenty-first century are located on the referential side of the cycle of, on the one hand, acknowledging the impossibility of authentic expression and the display thereof in self-referential language and, on the other hand, insisting on the necessity to pretend as if it were possible through the strategic employment of a rhetoric of sincerity and referential language. The contribution of the present study to the examination of this contemporary development consists of the analysis of selected examples from a particularly flourishing segment of the so-called middle-brow literary market – that of the realist family novel – in light of this new sincerity. The authors of these novels strive to transcend the performance of the impossibility of meaning and its communication characteristic of the postmodern period (Strub and Verwoert 236–37): Drawing on eighteenth-century genre conventions and the rhetoric of sincerity to, as it were, write inner lives, they compose literary works that produce an emotional "middle ground on which to make a deep connection with another human being" (Franzen, "David Foster Wallace" 164) while simultaneously retaining an intellectual awareness of "the inviolable, untraversable, and utterly vast spaces between us" (Robinson, *Gilead* 234).

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