

# Maddening Melancholy: The Perils of Psychological Reductionism in Walker Percy, Richard Ford, and Jonathan Franzen

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*Over the past twenty odd years, North America has witnessed the complete medicalization of unhappiness by transforming it into depression, which has been conceived in psychologically reductionistic terms. Many are unhappy with this state of affairs, including the contemporary American novelists, Walker Percy, Richard Ford, and Jonathan Franzen. This paper explores why they are unhappy with this trend and why they reject psychological reductionism in favor of a vision of life that is more thoroughly moral in its outlook.*

In *The Progress Paradox: How Life Gets Better While People Feel Worse*, Greg Easterbrook attempts to account for the odd fact that while we in the West are much better off on “nearly every indicator of social welfare” (Foran, 2004, D10), we are becoming more unhappy. Indeed, Easterbrook notes that despite the fact that “average Americans and Europeans not only live better than 99 per cent of the human beings who ever existed, [and that] they live better than most of the royalty of history,” the “trend line for happiness has been flat for fifty years” (Easterbrook, 2003; cited in Foran, 2004, D10).

Concomitant with this trend is the fact that within this time frame we have witnessed the complete medicalization of unhappiness by reconstructing it as “depression.” According to Emily Fox Gordon, who spent her life in therapy (and, she says, recovering from it) we have become “saturated with therapy,” so much so in fact that “society has remade itself in therapy’s image” (Gordon, 2000, 29, 229). This is particularly true of ‘depression,’ which is currently one of the most commonly diagnosed mental ‘illnesses.’ Partly, the exponential increases for this diagnosis has to do with the fact that a new series of drugs have been developed to treat depression.<sup>1</sup> These are the selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRI’s), such as Prozac, Celexa, Zoloft and a host of others. Part too has to do with the fact that, along with the rise in various forms of psychotherapy (for depression as well as other forms of mental illness), there has been a parallel rise in therapists.<sup>2</sup> There is, however, a third, more conceptual reason why rates of depression have risen so dramatically over the past twenty years, and this has to do with

how we conceive of unhappiness in our culture. We have become excessively reductionistic in our conceptions of happiness and unhappiness. As a result, we have lost a sense of the depth of these terms, opting instead for a superficial rendering of them often cashed out in terms of material preference satisfaction. By examining some work of three recent American novelists—Walker Percy, Richard Ford, and Jonathan Franzen—I shall argue that our preference for superficial conceptions of happiness and our medicalization of melancholy constitutes (what some people call) a category mistake; i.e., it is analogous to eating the body of Christ in communion for its nutritional benefit, as one commentator has expressed it (See Elliott, 2003).

In saying this, I am not claiming that reductionistic conceptions of unhappiness are *always* wrong, nor am I claiming that treating unhappiness within the context of the biomedical model is always unhelpful.<sup>3</sup> Rather, my claim is that there is a wide variety of ways to be unhappy in our culture and that we have focused only on one to our detriment. Although I can't lay out a detailed argument for this in this paper, my belief is that a full notion of happiness will have to think of it in a way similar to the way in which virtue theorists (broadly construed) have done so, beginning with Aristotle and including contemporary philosophers such as Alasdair MacIntyre, Charles Taylor, and Bernard Williams. Central to this tradition is the notion that there are specified ways in which to do an action that defines its virtue or *arête*. Doing an action this way and, more generally, living one's life virtuously in this sense leads to what Aristotle called "*eudaimonia*." This in turn involves being able to reflect back on one's life with a sense of self satisfaction because one has fulfilled one's tasks in life successfully (Aristotle, 1941). Obviously, this is quite different than simple preference satisfaction.

As noted above, I will argue my point by examining some contemporary American fiction. All three of the authors I have chosen to examine reject, in their various ways, central aspects of psychological reductionism. This is to say, they reject the view that our mental wellness and our well being more generally can be reduced to our psychological states, whether those psychological states be explained in terms of preference satisfaction, behavioralism, or neurology. This rejection is made quite directly and clearly in Percy's *Love in the Ruins* (1971) and Franzen's *The Corrections* (2001) since both these works present us, in part, with a parody of psychological reductionism. Percy's parody centers around a device he calls an "ontological lapsometer," which purports to be able to look into our soul and detect, as well as cure, the material, neurological basis of our discontent. Franzen adds a further dimension to this with his introduction of a new drug/technol-

ogy combination he calls “Correctall” whose aim is not just to cure people from psychological disease and discontent, but to improve us so that we are psychologically “better than well.” Richard Ford’s two novels featuring Frank Bascombe—*The Sportswriter* (1986) and *Independence Day* (1995)—are more oblique in their indictment of psychological reductionism, in part because Ford offers us no parody of it. Rather, through the character of Frank Bascombe, Ford presents us with someone who struggles with his life and who fails to achieve much happiness despite the fact that he has consciously chosen some life strategies that he hopes will attain that end. The strategies that Frank chooses, however, don’t work because, as we shall see, they are either themselves forms of psychological reductionism or are at least consistent with that viewpoint. As Ford depicts Frank’s attempts to overcome these strategies and the worldview that they express, he displays for us not only what is wrong with psychological reductionism but suggests as well an alternative to it.

#### *Walker Percy’s Love in the Ruins*

*Love in the Ruins* is set in a small city called Paradise in the American South. Its protagonist, psychiatrist Dr. Tom More, awaits the apocalypse, an upcoming war between blacks and whites, the poor and the rich, the “Bantus” on the one side, an odd mixture of “Knotheads” (Christian conservatives) and “Lefts” (liberal unbelievers) on the other. More is in bad shape: an alcoholic who is both a therapist and a patient at the local mental hospital, More works mostly at avoiding life by a combination of bird watching and excessive drinking. His melancholy and suicidal ideation, however, serves to distinguish him from his neighbors. “Most Americans,” he says, “do well enough. In fact, until lately, nearly everyone tried and succeeded in being happy but me. . . . I was unlucky. My daughter died, and my wife ran off with a heathen Englishman, and I fall prey to bouts of depression and morning terror, to say nothing of abstract furies and desultory lusts for strangers” (Percy, 1971, 17). But times are changing: odd “psychiatric disorders have cropped up in both Lefts and Conservatives” causing them to be unhappy as well. “Conservatives have begun to fall victim to unseasonable rages, delusions of conspiracies, high blood pressure, and large bowel complaints. Liberals are more apt to contract sexual impotence, morning terror, and a feeling of abstraction of the self from itself. So it is that a small Knothead city like my hometown . . . can support half a dozen proctologists, while places like Berkeley or Beverly Hills have a psychiatrist in every block”

(Percy, 1971, 17). Despite their differences, the problem for both groups is the same and lies in their longing for an unknown object. As More puts it: "The first thing a man remembers is longing and the last he is conscious of before death is exactly that same longing" (Percy, 1971, 18).

Help from this malaise may however be on its way. Intent on uncovering the physical basis of this longing, More has constructed a new device, an "Ontological Lapsometer," which he maintains "can probe the very secrets of the soul, diagnose the maladies that poison the wellsprings of man's hope" (Percy, 1971, 6). His medical device can purportedly, in other words, uncover and treat the physical, neurological basis of what we might refer to as our culture's existential illnesses.

As More puts it: "I know now that the heavy ions have different effects on different brain centers. For example, Heavy Sodium radiation stimulates Brodmann Area 32, the center of abstractive activity or tendencies towards angelism, while Heavy Chloride stimulates the thalamus, which promotes adjustment to the environment, or, as I call it without prejudice, bestialism. The two conditions are not mutually exclusive. It is not uncommon nowadays to see patients suffering from angelism-bestialism. A man, for example, can feel at one and the same time extremely abstracted and inordinately lustful toward lovely young women who may be perfect strangers" (Percy, 1971, 23).

Percy himself was a physician and also studied to become a psychiatrist: hence, he was quite aware that psychology and psychiatry could be reductionistic without being neurological, and so Percy offers a parody of behavioralism as well, especially in his depiction of the "Love Clinic." Here, scientists (including an ex-priest who operates the "vaginal computer") watch and record every event during various sexual acts. Their 'star' subject is Lillian. A typical session has her walk into the "behavior room" which is furnished with an examining table replete with stirrups, a hospital bed, "a tube of K-Y jelly, and a rack for the sensor wires with leads to the recording devices in the observation room" (Percy, 1971, 105). She quickly, and perfunctorily undresses as "briskly as a housewife getting ready for her evening bath and paying no more attention to the viewing mirror than if it were her vanity..." (Percy, 1971, 105). She then clips "Luccite fittings to sensor wires—and again with the impression of holding a bobby pin in her teeth—she inserts one after the other into the body orifices, as handily and thriftily as a teen-ager popping in contact lenses" (Percy, 1971, 106). She then stimulates herself to orgasm as the scientists record it all. Off to the side of the observation room is the "Observation Stimulation Overflow

Area,” a closet sized room which is provided “to accommodate those observers who are stimulated despite themselves by the behavior they observe. For although ... the observer hopes to retain his scientific objectivity, it must be remembered that after all the observers belong to the same species as the observed and are subject to the same ‘environmental stimuli.’ Hither to the closet, alone or in pairs or severally, observers may discreetly repair, each to relieve himself or herself according to his needs. ‘It iss the same as a doctor having hiss own toilet, nicht?’” suggests Helga, the matronly Bavarian gynecologist (Percy, 1971, 110). The Head of the Love Clinic is particularly proud that, unlike other clinics, the “chicken room” (as it is called) has never been used at Love, and indeed it is filled with a computer and a cot littered with dusty scholarly journals.

Central to the plot line and indeed the point of *Love in the Ruins* is a curious and mysterious con-artist/scientist/FBI agent, Art Immelmann. It is actually Immelmann who turns the Ontological Lapsometer from a purely diagnostic tool to an instrument used in the treatment of ‘disease’. Although we are left in the dark regarding exactly what Immelmann’s intentions are, it is clear that he does not actually intend to help or to heal people. Instead, Immelmann accentuates the problems that people already have, turning Knotheads into even worse fits of rage and creating Lefts who are even more abstracted. The result is complete chaos in Paradise and in fact the Lapsometers literally create a firestorm that rages throughout the town. The Ontological Lapsometer, then, is rather like excessive drinking or bird-watching; it is a way to avoid one’s life, not engage in it. Moreover, it transfers control over one’s life to something that is not essentially you even if, paradoxically, the lapsometer works on your neurology.

Part of Percy’s point, surely, is that activities such as this remove the possibility of one engaging in behavior that is done well; i.e., in other words, done virtuously. And if virtue is indeed tied to happiness as Aristotle and Percy suggest, then it seems that the promise of the Ontological Lapsometer to cure the ills of humankind by ridding us of our longing and discontent is false. One consequence of this is that the reduction of people to their psychological states does not offer those people true human happiness.

### *Jonathan Franzen’s The Corrections*

*The Corrections* is also a tale about people struggling toward functionality and happiness. In this case, it is the Lampert family; parents Alfred and Enid, and their now adult children, Gary, Chip, and Denise. The

Lamperts come from the small mid-western town of St. Jude, and Alfred especially embodies values typical of Midwest Protestantism: work hard, don't complain about anything, and treat people fairly. Consistent with this ethic, however, he is also an emotionally stunted man who has had great difficulty establishing intimacy with anybody in his life, including his wife, Enid, who suffers from the lack of love Alfred has shown her and from the dictatorial manner in which he has headed the family. This has made her a whiny, grasping woman quick to find fault with others, and exasperatingly conscious of (and insecure about) money and social status. Alfred and Enid, in short, suffer from the sort of longing that Percy described in *Love in the Ruins*. Unable to fulfill this longing, they disengage from life; Alfred to the basement and his easy chair, and Enid to a fantasy world where she and her children live successful, wondrous lives.

Denise is the youngest of the Lampert family, and its' darling with everyone except her mother. Although a successful chef, by the end of the novel she has lost her job by having slept with her boss and his wife (separately, and unbeknownst to the other). Chip is the youngest in the family: like his sister Denise, his sex life brings him trouble as he is fired from his professorship at an Ivy-League College for sleeping with one of his students. Although his knowledge of consumerist, post-industrial America (along with his complete cynicism and self absorption) allowed him some brief success running a web-based scam in Lithuania, Chip loses that job as well barely escaping Lithuania with his life and returns to St. Jude unemployed and penniless. Like their parents, then, Denise and Chip have failed in their lives and stand in need of some 'corrections.'

Gary, by contrast, appears as a model of success, at least as success is typically measured in consumerist America. He is an accomplished investment banker, and he is married to an attractive and independently wealthy wife, Caroline. Together, they have three healthy children. Gary however is not well. He has suffered all his life from what he takes to be his father's lack of appreciation for Gary's success. Perhaps worse, his wife Caroline, a self-help advocate who runs her life according to the latest trends in pop psychology, is convinced that Gary is suffering from depression and that he needs therapy and medication for it. Caroline considers herself an expert in mental health by having 'successfully' undergone five years of therapy. According to Gary, this has given her "a life long advantage over [him] in the race for mental health" (Franzen, 2001, 159). Gary fears being diagnosed as depressed however because he believes that "if the idea that he was depressed

gained currency, he would forfeit his right to his opinions.” As it turns out, he is right about this: once Caroline gets him to “surrender” and admit to being depressed, his voice within his family loses all force (Franzen, 2001, 237).

I shall return below to the relationship between Gary and Caroline since it reveals something fundamental about Franzen’s thoughts regarding human happiness. To see that however we must first examine the novel’s treatment of a drug/technology treatment called “Corecktall.” It was developed originally in the novel as a treatment drug for people suffering from diseases such as Parkinson’s: it has, however, “proved so powerful and versatile that its promise extends not only to therapy but to outright *cure*, and to a cure not only of ... terrible degenerative afflictions, but also of a host of ailments typically considered psychiatric or even psychological. Simply put, Corecktall offers for the first time the possibility of renewing and *improving* the hard wiring of an adult human brain” (Franzen, 2001, 189). Corecktall, it would seem, is similar in kind though different in degree to the most recent antidepressants now on the market, the ubiquitous SSRI’s such as Prozac. For, as psychiatrist Peter Kramer noted in his book, *Listening to Prozac* (1993), although Prozac can of course be used to treat clinical depression, it can also be used to treat people who are not (or no longer) mentally ill to make them “better than well” as he phrases it since Corecktall can, according to its marketers at least, permanently “make any action the patient is performing easier *and more enjoyable* to repeat and to sustain” (Franzen, 2001, 198). In this sense, Corecktall truly is a ‘happy pill.’ It is a further step along in what Kramer has called “cosmetic psychopharmacology;” it is purportedly a perfected Ontological Lapsometer.

Franzen obliquely suggests reasons why we should not celebrate such an event since Corecktall can offer only only a semblance of happiness, not the real thing. To see the argument Franzen presents for this in *The Corrections*, we have to examine further the relationship between Gary and his wife, Caroline. Such an examination reveals that though Gary is in fact a pompous, controlling, and self-serving ass, Caroline is far worse. In their marital battles—over child care, housework, their individual behavior—Gary is, like his father, a small and close minded moralist. This of course is reprehensible, but note that it is so not because the old-fashioned notions of personal responsibility and truth telling are reprehensible—far from it—but because Gary improperly understands and enforces these concepts. In contrast, Caroline is completely committed to seeing all behavior exclu-

sively in biomedical terms. As Gary expresses it, “His lumbering forces of conventional domestic warfare were no match for [her] biological weaponry. He cruelly attacked her *person*, she heroically attacked his *disease*” (Franzen, 2001, 201). This would seem to grant Caroline the moral high road. In fact, however, Caroline is, perhaps unknowingly, committed to an overthrow of morality since on her view behavior is nothing more than biochemistry of the brain. And correcting behavior is not about moral responsibility, it’s about chemical change: behavioral change is much better left, she believes, to external forces like Coreck tall (or, e.g., an SSRI) rather than an internal recognition of a need to change.

That this is a false position is argued for in the ending of *The Corrections*. Despite the fact that Gary is now full of whatever the latest developments in psychopharmacology can offer, his life remains empty, and he is no closer to coming to any sort of self-recognition. Chip conversely has finally overcome his self-centeredness. His close escape from Lithuania, in combination with a recognition of just how serious his father’s illness is, have presented him with a genuinely moral choice whether to stay in St. Jude for a while and help care for his father, or return to a life of wasted consumerism in New York. By remaining in St. Jude, Chip finally begins to take moral responsibility for his life and is on the road to moral progress. Gary however continues to shift blame away from himself onto others and seeks happiness from external sources such as can be provided by psychopharmacology. The novel leaves us with the distinct sense that Gary will fail badly in his quest for happiness while Chip shows genuine promise. As we shall see in the next section when discussing the work of Richard Ford, fulfilling this promise of a happier life involves facing one’s past and accepting oneself as the primary cause of one’s actions. The treatments offered by psychological reductionism through psychopharmacology (whether they be ones currently available or fictional ones such as Coreck tall) alternatively renders one’s personal past insignificant for anything other than correct diagnosis. But in doing this, it makes us passive in the passage of our own lives; it makes us less than fully human.

#### *Richard Ford’s The Sportswriter and Independence Day*

Frank Bascombe is the protagonist in two of Richard Ford’s novels, *The Sportswriter* (1986) and the Pulitzer Prize winning *Independence Day* (1995). Despite Frank’s claims that he has led a successful and relatively happy life, there is good reason to believe that his claims on this point are



either disingenuous or the product of self-deception. This is revealed in several different ways in these novels. Most obviously, we can see this in terms of the fact that his careers have taken a decidedly downhill trajectory. He began in his twenties as a successful and critically acclaimed fiction writer, even selling one of his works (for a considerable amount of money) to a Hollywood producer who planned to make his story into a movie. Suffering from a serious writing block, however, Frank abandoned fiction to become a sportswriter. By the time he has reached his forties, moreover, he has forsaken writing altogether and has opted instead to sell real estate.

Despite its rather lowly reputation, in certain quarters at least, selling real estate has provided Frank with some valuable lessons. In particular, it has taught him that happiness is *not* primarily a matter of material wealth. This is because one's happiness is bound up with one's identity and that identity can't be constructed and maintained entirely or even primarily through one's material acquisitions. This truth is, Frank maintains, typically missed by prospective home-buyers who attempt to define themselves by the purchase of a house that somehow will announce to the world who and what they are. I vividly remember a similar experience when renting my first 'bachelor' apartment when I was an undergraduate in my early twenties. I recall having had enough of roommates: too many unexpected (and unwanted) parties, too many fights about who had failed to wash the dishes, and too many misunderstandings leading to hurt feelings. So I set off on a quest for an apartment that was to be mine alone. Although I had "hopes that pointed to the clouds," as Wordsworth once said, I was but a poor undergraduate student and so my hopes had little connection to what was realistically available to me. My vision of a suitable apartment—something that displayed my true inner being, my ontological self, as it were—roguish, young, renegade intellectual is what I recall hoping for—was simply not in my price range (if it existed at all). The apartment I got was barely able to accommodate the bed and pathetic chrome kitchenette set that came with it and had walls so thin that I could literally smell my neighbors. Unfortunately, however, my apartment wasn't *that* bad: it wasn't cockroach infested nor was it in a seedy and dangerous part of town. An apartment like that would have had its' own cache. But neither was it anything close to being elegantly impressive. It was, rather, perfectly, banally ordinary for someone of my age and means. I was, in other words, depressingly like everyone else. This feeling is what Frank Bascombe refers to as the "realty dreads," which he describes as that "cold, unwelcome built-in American realization that we're just like

the other schmo, wishing his wishes, lusting his stunted lusts, quaking over his idiot frights and fantasies, all of us popped out of the same unthinkable mold" (Ford, 1995, 57; cited in Elliott, 2003, 137).

There is clearly some truth to Frank's claim, but he overstates his case. Although our desires are quite common, and hence don't serve to individuate us from others particularly well,<sup>4</sup> this does not mean that we cannot be individuated at all. Seeing how Ford makes his case for this position requires that we look at three views that Frank holds: (i) his view that literature is inherently deceptive, (ii) his disdain for what he calls "factualism," and (iii) his life strategy for surviving what he refers to as the "Existence Period" of his life. I shall discuss each of these in turn.

When Frank initially abandoned writing fiction to become a sports-writer, he claimed that he did so on the basis of what he called "[t]he pernicious lie of literature." He describes this lie as follows: at important events in characters lives—i.e., at events which we believe define and individuate a character's life, "when touchdowns are scored, knock-outs recorded, loved ones buried, orgasms notched," literature presents people as being "*in* an emotion, that we are within ourselves and not able to detect other emotions we might also be feeling, or be about to feel, or prefer to feel" (Ford, 1986, 119).

Frank maintains that this is the lie of "factualism," which is the belief that the choices we make and the behavior in which we engage actually defines who and what we are. Interestingly, factualism seems to have much in common with virtue theory and in particular Aristotle's belief that we become a particular kind of person through our actual behaviour. Frank eschews this, however: he wants rather to "see around the sides" of things. As he puts it: "If I was mad or ecstatic, I always realized I could just as easily feel or act a different way if I wanted to ... even though I might've been convinced that the way I was acting probably represented the way I *really* felt... This can be an appealing way to live your life, since you can convince yourself you're really just a tolerant generalist and kind toward other views" (Ford, 1986, 64).

Despite what Frank wishes were the case, people are simply not able to be so pliable and retain a secure sense of self. This is, in effect what Tom More, in *Love in the Ruins*, called "abstractness" wherein people fail to see their lives in concrete terms and often see it instead from the perspective of an 'other.' In *The Sportswriter*, Ford calls this abstractness "dreaminess," and Frank has suffered from it since he was twenty-one while lying in a Navy

hospital: "I used to lie in bed ... and think about nothing but dying, which for a while I was interested in. I'd think about it in the way you'd think of a strategy in a ball game, deciding one way and then deciding another, seeing myself dead then alive then dead again, as if considerations and options were involved" (Ford, 1986, 35-36). Such dreaminess is not particularly problematic for the young, Frank notes, and indeed it can even be pleasurable. "But when you get to be my age, dreaminess is *not* so pleasurable, ... and one should avoid it if you're lucky enough to know it exists, which most people aren't" (Ford, 1986, 42-43).

It is this dreaminess that allows Frank to look at his rather limited life and think of it as successful. My life, he says, "has not been and isn't now a bad one at all. In most ways it's been great. And although the older I get, the more things scare me, and the more apparent it is to me that bad things can and do happen to you, very little really worries me or keeps me up at night. I still believe in the possibilities of passion and romance. And I would not change much if anything at all. I might not choose to get divorced. And my son, Ralph Bascombe, would not die. But that's about it for these matters" (Ford, 1986, 3-4).

Frank is clearly being disingenuous here: divorce and the death of one's child are not events that one can cast off parenthetically. Like most of us, Frank is obsessed with these events: indeed, they largely *define* him despite the fact that he does not want them to. Rather, he says, "All we ever want is to get to a point where the past can explain nothing about us and we can get on with life. Whose history can ever reveal very much? In my view Americans put too much emphasis on their pasts as a way of defining themselves, which can be death dealing" (Ford, 1986, 24).

Frank is both right and wrong here. He is wrong because it is typically more healthy than damaging to accept and deal with one's past, and he is also wrong in claiming that Americans emphasize their pasts. Quite the opposite is in fact often the case. When people take drugs like Prozac, for example, they do so to get better *without* having to deal with their pasts. That is because SSRI's work, to whatever extent they do, because one has insufficient levels of serotonin in one's body, not because of who one is or what one has done.

Frank is also partially correct in his analysis of the past, however. Psychoanalysis in particular sometimes seemed to want patients to dwell on their pasts as an end in itself. Frank brings this out when he relates the story of a woman he once had an affair with who had "spent thousands of dollars and

hours consulting the most highly respected psychiatrist” in the city “until one day she bounced into the office, full of high spirits. ‘Oh, Dr. Fasnacht,’ she proclaimed, ‘I woke up this morning and realized I’m cured!’ I’m ready to stop my visits and go out into the world on my own as a full-fledged citizen. You’ve cured me. You’ve made me so happy!’ To which the old swindler replied: ‘Why, this is disastrous news. You wish to end your therapy is the most distressing evidence of your terrible need to continue. You are much more ill than I ever thought. Now lie down” (Ford, 1986, 101).

Frank is also correct about the past in another (very curious) sense. Paradoxically, excessive thoughts about our pasts can be part of a process of ‘victimology.’ If we view ourselves as determined by our past, then we can be led to believe that we have no control over our lives and hence we cannot be held morally accountable for it and indeed are really victims of our pasts. Frank’s response to this view is to claim that “[w]e all have histories of one kind or another. Some of us have careers that do fine or that do lousy. Something got us to where we are, and nobody’s history could’ve brought another Tom, Dick, or Harry to the same place. And to me that fact limits the final usefulness of these stories” (Ford, 1986, 42-43).

Frank must somehow manage to reach some sort of equilibrium between these two views: excessive moralism on the one hand and psychological reductionism on the other. He must, in other words, avoid the paths taken by Gary on the one extreme and Caroline on the other, as they are described in *The Corrections*. Making headway toward this equilibrium is difficult, however, but Frank does make some, though it unfortunately comes as a result of two unhappy events, the suicide of one of Frank’s friends and an accident to his other son, Paul, which occurs on a July fourth weekend trip they take together.

Frank’s friend, Walter Lockett, is a recently divorced man: indeed, the two men met in a club for divorced men. Recently, Walter has had a one-night stand with another man—his first and only homosexual experience—and he can’t accept this concrete fact about what he has done. In reflecting upon this, Frank thinks that all Walter was doing was taking “pleasure in the consolations of others” and that at times this is “damned necessary when enough of the chips are down.... Walter Lockett would be alive today if he’d known that” (Ford, 1986, 341). This is perhaps true enough, but Frank once again extends the point too far by implying that anything that gets us through the night is okay since few of us have the “depth of character as noble and enduring as willingness to come off the bench to play a great game

when knowing full well that you'll never be a regular; or as one who chooses not to hop into bed with your best friend's beautiful wife" (Ford, 1986, 341). Surely, even though many people do fail to fulfill their professional responsibilities and many married people commit adultery, sometimes with their best friend's spouse, that fact does not excuse or justify such behavior. Frank has to learn to take responsibility for his actions and not simply run away from his life, as he has tended to do in the past.

Frank has run away both literally and metaphorically. During a difficult period in his relation with his wife, Frank ran away from her by taking a term teaching position away from home (where he engaged in a four month affair with a colleague). After their divorce, he ran away to France with a much younger woman before eventually settling in Florida for a time. And of course, he has run away from writing. Like Alfred in *The Corrections* and Tome More in *Love in the Ruins*, Frank also runs away by retreating from the world: indeed he has explicitly developed retreat as a strategy for living through what he refers to as the "Existence Period" of his life. This is, he maintains, a "successful practice [for] middle life," a "high-wire act of normalcy, the part that comes *after* the big struggle which led to the big blow-up, the time in life when whatever was going to affect us 'later' in life actually affects us, a period when we go along more or less self-directed and happy" though completely unmemorable. For Frank, achieving this state depends on his ability "to ignore much of what I don't like or that seems worrisome and embroiling, and then usually see it go away" (Ford, 1995, 10, 94, and 10). This is because "you get so fouled up with all you did and surrendered to and failed at and fought and didn't like, that you can't make any progress. Another way of saying this is that when you're young, your opponent is the future; but when you're not young, your opponent's the past and everything you've done in it and the problem of getting away from it" (Ford, 1995, 95).

Although Frank's strategy may yield some successes—it allows him to sleep comfortably at night without dreaming—it also precludes other things such as attaining truly intimate relationships with his children or any women in his life, including his ex-wife, Ann, and his current girlfriend, Sally. Frank's idea of a perfect relationship during his existence period is a "'your place or mine' romance, affording each other generous portions of companionship, confidence (on an as-needed basis), within-reason reliability and plenty of spiciness, untranscendent transport—all with ample 'space' allotted and the complete presumption of *laissez-faire*... while remaining fully respectful

of the high priced lessons and vividly catalogued mistakes of adulthood.” While Frank admits that this isn’t love, it’s “closer to love than the puny goods most married folks dole out” (Ford, 1995, 10).

Not surprisingly, of course, neither Ann nor Sally are satisfied with this sort of relationship over the long term, and so Ann has remarried and Sally, like dozens of previous girlfriends, begins to pull away from Frank. But Frank can do nothing to change these situations except let Sally and he slowly drift apart and make a half-hearted attempt to rejuvenate his relationship with Ann, which he knows has absolutely no chance of being successful. (Indeed, that is why, paradoxically, he chooses it.) But Ann will have none of it and tells him: “For a time, ... for a long time really, I knew we weren’t all the way *to* the truth with each other. But that was okay, because we were trying to get there together. But suddenly I just felt hopeless, and I saw that the truth didn’t really exist for you. ... I wanted someone with a true heart, that’s all. That wasn’t you” (Ford, 1995, 253, 254).

Frank’s problems with his son are similar. Although he has the best of intentions, he still sees himself as an ‘as-needed’ father. Moreover, his old dreaminess afflicts him vis-à-vis his son as well, as he constructs wondrous futures for him in his head despite the fact that Paul is not doing well at all. He’s been caught shoplifting several times, has had an accident with his step-father’s car while driving under age without a license, and has recently attacked his stepfather physically. It would appear as well that Paul suffers from something akin to Tourette’s Syndrome.

Given contemporary culture, Paul is of course seeing a psychiatrist for his problems. In fact, Ann has even sent him to a psychiatric ‘health camp’ (Camp Unhappy as its ‘inmates’ refer to it) where Paul “was judged to be ‘too inactive’ and therefore encouraged to wear mime makeup and spend part of every day sitting in an invisible chair with an invisible pane of glass in front of him, smiling and looking surprised and grimacing at passersby ... The camp counselors, who were all secretly ‘milieu therapists’ in mufti—loose white tee-shirts, baggy khaki shorts, muscle-bound calves, dogwhistles, lanyards, clipboards, preternaturally geared up for unstructured heart to hearts—expressed the opinion that Paul was intellectually beyond his years ... but was emotionally underdeveloped ... which in their view was a problem” (Ford, 1995, 11).

Frank discovers however that Paul is actually struggling with the same affliction as Frank as Paul wages “a complex but losing struggle to forget certain things” (Ford, 1995, 12). In particular Paul attempts to forget the

deaths of loved ones, namely, his dog and his brother. But he has fallen into the bad habit of “thinking about thinking,” and it’s only “just before the precise moment of sleep, when he can briefly forget about everything ... [that he can] feel happy” (Ford, 1995, 14).

As we’ve seen with Frank, this is a strategy doomed to failure. But so too is the strategy promoted by the psychiatrists and milieu therapists of Camp Unhappy since life is not as easily structured as they would have us believe: there is no way all life’s events can “fit down flush on top of each other” in such a way that we can make rational sense of them entirely (Ford, 1995, 14). There is, for example, no way to make sense of the death of a beloved pet of a young son/brother. And for children, a divorce by their parents must remain a painful mystery for them despite the fact that the parents work to ameliorate that discomfort (and even if the children are better off with divorced parents rather than having fighting parents remain together ‘for the sake of the kids’). But forgetting or the attempt to do so is not the way to salvation and happiness either. Such events *do* happen to us and they, in combination with our reaction to them, define us. This is what Frank finally begins to learn at the end of *Independence Day*, although that lesson comes at the expense of a serious accident to Paul. While visiting the Baseball Hall of Fame, Paul enters a batting cage at the insistence of his father (who is angry at his own ineptitude as a hitter), is struck in the eye with a ball, and now runs the risk of losing his sight in that eye.

Frank attempts to explain the event to his ex-wife, Ann. “I don’t think he wanted to put his eye out,” he tells her, “but he may have wanted to get whacked. To see what it felt like. Haven’t you ever felt that way?”

“No,” Ann says, and shakes her head, staring at me.”

“Well, I have, and I wasn’t crazy ... When Ralph died. And after you and I got divorced. I’d have been happy to take a hard one in the eye. It would’ve been easier than what I *was* doing. I just don’t want you to think he’s nuts. He’s not” (Ford, 1995, 396).

In this moment when he attempts to explain his son’s (and his own) feelings, Frank simultaneously rejects psychological reductionism and begins finally to take responsibility for his actions. “It *is* my fault,” he says: “Sure it is. ... When your dog gets run over, it’s your fault. When your kid gets his eye busted, that’s your fault. I was supposed to help him manage his risks” (Ford, 1995, 396).

Having reached this point, Frank begins to be less abstracted from his life. He no longer finds it enthralling not to get to the bottom of things

(Ford, 1995, 412). That is, he now wants to find some things in life that are definite. Coming to this makes possible a more healthy relationship with Paul and Ann, and also with Sally, who two days earlier was ready to end her relationship with him. Now, however, she recognizes a difference in him: he now seems “more human” to her whereas before he seemed “pretty buttoned up and well insulated.” Paul’s accident may, she speculates, have motivated Frank to gradually emerge from his existence period, which she thought was a “simulated way to live your life,” a “sort of mechanical isolation that couldn’t go on forever” (Ford, 1995, 433, 434).

### *Concluding Remarks*

By examining three contemporary American novelists, this paper has argued that the current trend in North America of attempting to induce happiness in people by divorcing individuals from their lives and treating them reductively as nothing other than their psychological states (however that gets defined) is wrongheaded. SSRI’s, ontological lapsometers, corecktal, and divorcing oneself from one’s past and from intimacy all fail to induce true human happiness though they may mask our unhappiness and create a simulation of a happy life. This masking, of course, need not be all bad, but it must be recognized for what it is. It is not a value in and of itself; at best, such masking devices may allow us better to pursue our lives in such a way that we can attain what Aristotle called *eudaimonia*.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> A number of people have argued that this description gets things backwards. SSRI's were actually created before anyone knew what kind of 'disease' they would be used to treat. They were, then, the world's first "designer drugs." See, e.g., Healy (1997).

<sup>2</sup> In Canada, the number of licensed psychologists increased 52% between 1982 and 1997 (See McLaren, 2000, and Stewart, 2001).

<sup>3</sup> For a wonderful personal account of someone who was helped by drug therapy for his depression, see Solomon (2001).

<sup>4</sup> Indeed, some have argued, persuasively I think, that our desires are "mimetic," i.e., we desire objects largely *only because* others desire them. See Girard (1966, 1987).