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**Electronic version**

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ejas/9036>

DOI: 10.4000/ejas.9036

ISSN: 1991-9336

**Publisher**

European Association for American Studies

**Electronic reference**

Aristi Trendel, « The Reinvention of Identity in Jeffrey Eugenides's *Middlesex* », *European journal of American studies* [Online], 6-2 | 2011, document 6, Online since 04 April 2011, connection on 30 April 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/ejas/9036> ; DOI : 10.4000/ejas.9036

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# *The Reinvention of Identity in Jeffrey Eugenides's *Middlesex**

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<sup>1</sup> In his second novel, *Middlesex*<sup>1</sup>, Jeffrey Eugenides is deep in the Greeks. If Melville in *Moby Dick* sets up an anthology of whaling, Eugenides builds his collection of Greekness. It may be because the Greeks found a mythical way out of the contradictions and the ambiguities that characterize the fragmented human being in search of unity through Hermaphroditus, the figure of an indivisible duality, quite appropriate to express the diverse reality of American unity. The Pulitzer-prized writer revisits the myth in a novel way combining it with the aporias of ethnicity. Gender trouble in *Middlesex* could hardly veil the immigrant and ethnic experience in America that spans three generations of a Greek family in the twentieth century. The novel is about reinventing your identity on different levels, be that Greek to American, female to male, says the author who, digging up his Greek origins, makes an original contribution to the Greek-American novel.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Although reviewers, unable to see the connection, found these two levels incongruous, Eugenides bridges this apparent gap by interweaving the strands of gender and ethnicity in the narrative, as his narrator sets out to construct his identity. The hyphenated being is the epitome of this *Bildungsroman* and novel of quest, both forms favored by ethnic literature. At the same time, *Middlesex* is a sort of epic which is a genre “generally associated with ethnogenesis, the emergence of a people, and can therefore seemingly be appropriated transnationally by all peoples,” as Werner Sollors says in *Beyond Ethnicity* (Sollors 238). In this multigenerational saga, the Stephanides invent and construct their Americanness and their Greekness against a backdrop of an American society at grips with assimilation and multiculturalism, and a Greek community responding to these issues.

<sup>3</sup> I will argue that there is no celebratory, aggressive multiculturalism in *Middlesex*; in his construction of ethnicity the author seems to opt for a middle rooted cosmopolitan way paved by the second generation which adopted American values, while preserving a native heritage under the strain of conflicting demands. George Giannaris in his study,

*The Greeks Against the Odds: Bilingualism in Greek Literature*, makes clear that “the second and third generation [...] finally declare that this [...] is their origin, and that assimilation does not mean disappearance.” (Giannaris 54). I would like to inquire into the formal expression of such a declaration that occurs along the generational continuum singularly marked by discontinuities in this archive of literary discourse.<sup>3</sup>

- 4 Thus the second generation is prominent and pivotal in the work of this third generation writer who recreates the immigrant past through a distant historical perspective and in a distinctively fictional form. Indeed, John Reily, in “Criticism of Ethnic Literature: Seeing the Whole Story,” maintains that the assertion of ethnicity in literature can be made only through a procedure by which a writer resolves formal problems, and can be completed only as the audience makes sense of it in terms of their competence with literary expression (Reily). The main formal problem Eugenides had to solve was the connection of the reinvention of the self, an enduring theme in American literature, with its ancient Greek antecedent, and its integration in a generational pattern that bore a self or selves in constant process of confrontation and composition.
- 5 Some reviewers also criticized the depiction of the transsexual experience in *Middlesex* finding it weak, although Suzan Frelich Appleton's essay, “Gender, Law, and Narrative: Contesting Gender in Popular Culture and Family Law: *Middlesex* and Other Transgender Tales,” proves the opposite. However, beyond this debate, what is of interest to us here is to see how the issue of gender becomes fully meaningful in the construction of ethnicity. K.N. Conzen and a host of other scholars conceptualise ethnicity as “a process of construction or invention which incorporates, adapts and amplifies pre-existing communal solidarities, cultural attitudes and historical memories.” (Conzen 4-5). The three pillars that support the novel are Greek mythology, history and religion, such cultural markers ensuring continuity through three generations and engineering the reinvention of ethnicity as a constitutive part of identity.
- 6 Sollors, in *Beyond Ethnicity*, questions the notion of generation and presents it as a metaphor rather than a precise location. Eugenides takes up the cultural construct of generation succession to follow the transformation of the immigrant into a public ethnic and finally into a symbolic ethnic. Precisely, this is how Foucault defines discontinuity: “jeu de transformations spécifiées, différentes les unes des autres [...] et liées entre elles selon les schémas de dépendance.” (Foucault 680). Continuity is viewed by Foucault as a locus of the dissolution of identity and of change. Discontinuity is held up as positive, as the possibility to redefine the subject by his incessant mobility. The gap, the lacuna which the American experience entails by wedging a hyphen, the mark of discontinuity, into identity seems to be filled by the American dream. Giannaris points out that the Greek American novels embody the success story of an ethnic minority that is unusually responsive to the American dream (Giannaris 53). Indeed, a progressive trend of upward social mobility can be observed in the Stephanides family, whose emigration to America is precipitated by the end of the Greek dream in 1922, to recover the Turkish territories in Asia Minor. I would like to look into the generational pattern, with a special emphasis on the second generation, as it is delineated within an American society wrestling with issues of descent and consent.
- 7 Although Eugenides claims that it was not the immigrant experience that inspired him the most, the grandparents' story in *Middlesex* constitutes a novel within a novel combining all the characteristics (fabula microstructure, frames, a worldview homologous to a new version of American history) that inform an immigrant novel

according to William Q. Boelhower's definition of the genre (Boelhower). One of the poles of tension that ground the structuring of the fabula, the Old World, is in the heart of the Greek sensibility, as it involves the death of the Great Idea, originally referring to the psychic union of the Greeks of the Greek Kingdom with the Greeks of the Ottoman Empire (1844), but later extended to territorial claims.

- 8 The narrator is a "grandchild of Byzantium," the offspring of the Asia Minor Catastrophe, which brought his/her grandparents to America endowing them with a project. Already on the boat they reinvent themselves. From brother and sister, Lefty and Des become husband and wife, "aware that what happened now would become the truth" (75), thus hosting the recessive gene responsible for Calliope's hermaphrodisim. As the muse of heroic poetry and having Homer in her genes (4), he-she sings her grandparents' exodus from the massacres of burning Smyrna letting the reader surmise what Eugenides makes clear in a radio interview (Moorhem), their link with Zeus and Hera who were not only husband and wife but also siblings. The process of acculturation for the Greek couple is painful and incomplete. "I do not want to look like an Amerikanidha" (94), declares Des who sticks throughout her life to the defining quality of womanhood in Greek peasant culture, "dropi," shamefulness.
- 9 Lefty's imperfectly learnt English is forgotten at the end of his life marked by his attachment to rebetika and his endeavors to restore Sappho's poetry. Although the new world means for them salvation and what Katherine Zepantis Keller calls "a metaphysical actualisation of the self" (Keller 48), assimilation for this first generation is viewed as an imposition and the melting pot ideology as an instrument of political will. The English class graduation pageant at the Ford Motor Company in Detroit, where Lefty found a short employment, is a case in point. The successful graduates enter a giant cauldron in Old World's traditional costumes and emerge in mufti waving American flags to the tune of "Yankee Doodle." Yet, the melting pot concept cannot be viewed simply as a process of cultural fusion, since the resolution finally points to an experience of alienation. At the end of their life, the grandparents become materially dependent upon their children and appear hardly adjusted to their environment.
- 10 If the grandparents' story constitutes an immigrant novel within the novel, with the parents' story Eugenides turns to the ethnic novel. "The dominant theme of these novels" (immigrant and ethnic), says Giannaris, "is the need for the preservation of the national and traditional identity of the Greek, while, at the same time, an 'anti-theme' responds to the need for an unavoidable assimilation" (Giannaris 54). This anti-theme is carried out by the two main characters and representatives of the second generation, Milton and Tessie and in particular the former, as traditional gender roles place Tessie in a secondary position. Moreover, the narrator authenticates the paternal experience, "I need to go behind the camera and see things through my father's eyes" (257), and puts forward a construction of identity that involves not an erasing but a doubling process. Milton's name is symptomatic of such an enhancement: behind the English poet there is an ancient Greek general, Miltiades. Likewise, Tessie and Milton's consanguineous marriage is the result of an attraction based on each other's American looks and attitude. But in addition to such narrative props, it is the concepts of public ethnicity and of rooted cosmopolitanism that support the construction of identity in *Middlesex*, and finally attempt to reconcile American values with native group's values.
- 11 The concept of public ethnicity is based on the conflation of ethnicity and the operative notion of what it is to be American. As Colin Greer puts it in "The Ethnic Question," "in a

strong sense" the concept advances "a view of national identity which confirms, at once, the efficacy of political pluralism, immigrant success, and government support of valued citizens" (Greer 132). Milton Stephanides exemplifies the single-minded pursuer of the American dream, the rugged individualist who follows a straight-line assimilation. The early American reproductions in the couple's bedroom, offering them "connection with the country's founding myths" (266), are indicative of the couple's integration. Milton scrambles up the ladder of socio-economic opportunity and achieves inclusion fighting his way alone out of overwhelming material deficiencies. Taking up his father's bar, he sets up Hercules Hot Dogs chain and unlike Harry Mark Petrakis's characters becomes successful in the Greek business *par excellence*, restaurant-ownership. Integration is achieved through education and adherence to the *laissez-faire* individualism and enterprise.

- 12 As a situation ethnic, Milton refuses to work and live in the Greek town, but threads the family's way through the different layers of American society and up to the Grosse Point, the upper class suburb, "where you go to wash yourself of ethnicity" (382), as the narrator aphoristically states about the suburb's private school. Through cunning and defiance, he bypasses the discriminatory codes meant to keep ethnics out of the WASP suburb thus becoming the first Greek to gain entrance, which confers a collective significance upon individual achievement. However, it is the figure of the cosmopolitan that rises against the politics of descent: Assimilation through residential integration is here the appropriation of a status. No structure of inequality and sacrifice appears inherent in assimilation. Ross Posnock, in "The Dream of Deracination," pointing back to the birth of cosmopolitanism in the eighteenth century, as the enactment of ideals of Enlightenment liberalism reminds us of the historical affinity between the cosmopolitan and the egalitarian (Posnock 803).
- 13 Milton follows the cosmopolitan tradition of the American egalitarian spirit. Yet once settled in Middlesex, the name of the street and of the futuristic house that symbolically evokes duality, he looks to the government for protection of the middle-class all-Americaness, inveighing against Stephen J. Roth, the judge who rules the desegregation of Detroit schools: "You see, Tessie? You understand why your dear old husband wanted to get the kids out of the school system? Because if I didn't, that goddamn Roth would be busing them to school in downtown Nairobi" (318). Defending and defining one's position in opposition to other groups is precisely the characteristic of the public ethnic according to Geer.
- 14 Nevertheless, the challenge of the cosmopolitan incites the charge of deracination. Posnock points out that "during the two-decade reign of multiculturalism [the sixties and the seventies] the cosmopolitanism and the universalism it sponsors have been under house arrest" (Posnock 804). Assimilationism does seem a challenge to descent and Hansen's law, the transcendence of ethnicity through the proclivity of the second generation to deny its origins, dubbed as treason, is precisely a moral appraisal of such a challenge. Marcus Lee Hansen's polarized view of the second generation as traitors and the third generation as redeemers, though severely criticised, finds some relevance in *Middlesex*. Milton's attitude, measured against the three main factors of ethnicity, language, religion and origin, appears wanting. Although his discourse is marked by ethnolectal indices, the Greek terms that point to the impossibility of translation, Milton's attempts to learn Greek are abandoned. Moreover, he is defined as an "apostate at the age of eight over the exorbitant price of votive candles" (13), and his challenge to

the Church, the main means for the preservation of the ethnic minority surpassing language and folk tradition, remains a lifelong defining trait.

15 But the rift with the Greek community is brought about by the divergence of views and interests over politics and in particular the Turkish invasion of Cyprus. His invective, "To Hell with the Greeks" (410), seals his betrayal. In this consent over descent debate, the narrator's comment is categorical: "In 1974, instead of reclaiming his roots by visiting Bursa, my father renounced them" (410). Thus the trip back to the Old Country, planned by Milton himself, remains suspended. This journey back to the old world, paralleling the original one to the new world, constitutes an expansion of the journey frame, a fundamental category in the immigration novel. Although this trip is viewed as tourism by Chapter Eleven, Milton's younger son, it is textualized as an identificatory re-inscription in Greece, for it involves the fulfilment of a "tama." This "promise to a saint," Desdemona's pledge to Saint Christopher to repair his church in Bithynios, if he saved her son from certain death during the second world war, becomes a structuring element in the narrative.

16 Indeed, the Church is in the heart of continuity-discontinuity dialectic. Omnipresent in the narrative, it frames the life of the group, although it is also a spring-board to comic episodes. The priest in Eugenides is not a noble figure; yet compared with the abject priestly characters in Kazan's work, he fares better. Tessie, unable to resist her Americanised cousin, declines to marry Father Mike, but continues to be a pious church-goer. The pull to Orthodoxy, whether spiritual or cultural, remains strong, as religion becomes instrumental in the reinvention of ethnicity. Thus Milton gives his tacit agreement to his wife to fulfil his mother's pledge (tama), when he decides to undertake the trip to Turkey, although he had never acknowledged such an obligation. However, the decisive volte-face occurs when he hands a large bill to his wife to light not one but "a bunch of candles" for his daughter after her disappearance (535), though still resisting this act of allegiance to his faith.

17 Nevertheless, the suspended trip that runs through the narrative, the vicarious candle-lighting, and the sole presence of the formerly alienated Greek group at his funeral underline the recognition of the moral and ethical weight of the community. This is how Dr Luce, the doctor who believing in nurture prescribes Callie's eradication of maleness, refers to Milton and Tessie: "In general the parents seem assimilationist and very "all-American" in their outlook, but the presence of this deeper ethnic identity should not be overlooked." (492). Indeed, Eugenides depicts Kwame Anthony Appiah's rooted cosmopolitans caught in the fire of conflicting loyalties. Appiah's ideal of rooted or partial cosmopolitanism does not ignore the challenge of engaging with difference, "does not seek to destroy patriotism", and "is not exhausted by the appeal to moral universalism" (Appiah 222). Thus it evades the pitfall of cosmopolitanism synonymous with globalism and prepares the way to symbolic ethnicity, an invaluable asset for the third generation.

18 Mary Waters advances that "the groups which have achieved a degree of individual and group social mobility adopt ethnicity as a symbolic voluntary identity which is intermittent in its effects on the individual and freely chosen as a valued personal asset" (Waters). The adult narrator who, in full awareness, tells the story of the reinvention of his identity goes all the way from an "all-American daughter" (470) to a Greek-American male-female alternating between the "we" of Americanness and the "we" of Greekness and thus articulating what Geertz phrases as "the irremovable strangeness of diversity".

(Geertz 120). Appiah does note that “collective identities … provide what we may call scripts: narratives that people can use in shaping their projects and in telling their lifestories” (Appiah 22). To a certain extent, this very narrative constitutes the fulfilment of the American Dream for the narrator who dreamt of writing a book with a long Greek name to add to the Great Book series his parents attempted to read.

19 The second generation attainment of the American Dream provides greater freedom of choice for their offspring who gains entry into one of the highest institutions of American society, the State Department and becomes a cultural attaché in Berlin, an official representative of American culture. The Turkish immigrant he contemplates in the streets inspires him the aphorism, “We’re all made up of many parts, other halves” (478), which defines the American experience, and takes him backward to his Asia Minor ancestry. In spite of the grandmother’s fans that display the Turkish genocide against the Greeks, there is no irredentist ideology in Eugenides, as in Elias Kazan, another second generation writer, no desire in the third generation Greek Anatolian to recover the lost territory.

20 There is only the narrative will to capitalize on the accumulated Greek heritage and keep it alive as part and parcel of Americanness. The danger of an irrevocable loss is being diagnosed, at the beginning of the narrative, in the narrator’s description of the Greek church: “Assumption, with its spirited coffee hours, its bad foundation and roof leaks, its strenuous ethnic festivals, its catechisms classes where our heritage was briefly kept alive before being allowed to die in the great diaspora” (13). While “the old country” gradually “recedes” (20) for the first generation, and is temporarily betrayed by the second, it is redeemed in the nick of time by the third. At the end of the narrative, Cal promises his grandmother to fulfil her pledge to the Saint and repair his church thus keeping the trip back to Bursa on hold, as the narrative gap between the adolescent at the end of the novel and the adult at the beginning is not bridged.

21 However, another trip within the country, symbolically over-determined, is completed. In the search for his identity, Cal goes west and in this conquest he enacts the union of his maleness and femaleness. The show at the Western club, where he has to work to earn a living after fleeing home, acts out the ancient myth of the union between Hermaphroditus and Salmacis, the water nymph. Yet his new identity would never be legitimate without its validation by another rite of passage. At his father’s funeral, Cal staying with his grandmother who reveals to him the family secret, valiantly guards the Middlesex door. Leaving adolescence and abandoning a single-gender mode of being are sealed by the old Greek custom that requires a man to block the door so that the dead’s spirit would not re-enter the house; “Middlesex” finally yields its meaning: “it was still the beacon it was intended to be … divested of the formalities of bourgeois life, a place designed for a new type of human being, who would inhabit a new world. I could not help feeling of course, that that person was me, me and all the others like me” (595).

22 Thus gender in *Middlesex* becomes a metaphor for the composite self. In fact, “Americans become more ‘American’ and less ethnic all the time. But in the course of participating in this process, they may also—simultaneously—become more ‘ethnic’,” as Glazer and Moynihan state in their introduction to *Ethnicity* (Glazer and Moynihan 16). Eugenides, who carefully avoids the pitfalls of essentialism and nationalism through the postmodern self-reflexivity of the narrative, sets up a new version of the American dream, the viability of the hyphenated being. This future-orientated ethnic renaissance

which, as Sollors underlines, "fits into the American tradition of backward utopias" (Sollors 211), constitutes a tentative synthesis of pluralistic and unitary impulses.

23 In this ethnic revival by memory, the author created a sense of the experience of the second generation in the frontline trenches of the cultural struggle. Through his emergence of gender and ethnicity, he amalgamated the liminality of the immigrant's and the hermaphrodite's experience relying on a second generation at the crossroads to create the tension of conflicting demands. Making the Greek presence felt in the American letters may augur the renaissance of the third generation Greek-American novel in a predictable discontinuity/continuity with the second generation one.

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## NOTES

1. All the quotes from the novel refer to the Picador edition, Jeffrey Eugenides. *Middlesex*. New York: Picador, 2002.

2. Bram van Moorhem. "The Novel as a Mental Picture of its Era," 3 A.M. Magazine, [http://www.3ammagazine.com/litarchives/2003/sep/interview\\_jeffrey\\_eugenides.html](http://www.3ammagazine.com/litarchives/2003/sep/interview_jeffrey_eugenides.html)

3. As Yiorgos Kalogeras, who uses Foucault's concept of the archive, says, "What cannot be emphasized enough is [...] the fact that these culture-bound stories and history belong to the archive—the general system of formation and transformation of statements" (Kalogeras 78).

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## INDEX

**Keywords:** assimilation, Bildungsroman, continuity-discontinuity, ethnic novel, Ethnicity, gender, Greek-American literature, Hansen's law, Hermaphroditus, identity, immigrant novel, integration, multiculturalism, multigenerational, politics of descent, public ethnic, rooted cosmopolitan, second generation, symbolic ethnic, third generation., transsexual

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