



# The Novel in a Time of Terror: *Middlesex*, History, and Contemporary American Fiction

*Samuel Cohen*

Jeffrey Eugenides's 2002 *Middlesex*, a critically acclaimed historical novel, has been praised as an expansive, epic portrait of the American twentieth century from its immigrant roots to the present.<sup>1</sup> It takes its readers from a Turkish village in the 1920s to the race riots of the late 1960s, following a Greek and then Greek American family across time and the world, spinning an interestingly twisted yarn in the voice of the family's latest product, whose gender identity, complicated by a genetically inherited hermaphroditism, is at the center of his story. The novel displays a particular historical imagination, as all historical novels do; it depends on a set of notions about the relationship between past, present, and future, about cause and effect, and about the possibilities and problems that attempts to understand and represent the past entail. And, as is also the case with all historical novels, its historical imagination can tell us something about the historical imagination of its times.

While it is no longer common in current critical discourse to discuss works in terms of aesthetic failure or success, I believe that *Middlesex* fails aesthetically and that it is important to talk about it in these terms because how it fails says something about its historical imagination and the historical imagination of its times. At the root of its failure, I'll argue, is the way it imposes a false closure on its narrative of the main character's gender crisis. This closure represents something other than a poor aesthetic choice. Rather, its falseness—the unearned, unwarranted character

of the novel's ending—is unintended, and so it represents a failure that is especially indicative of the unconscious effect of its historical imagination. The way *Middlesex* ends is in part due to, and thus can tell us something about, the way history felt in America in 2002.

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The formal phenomenon of closure is closely linked in the literature and thought of the second half of the twentieth century to the existential phenomenon of contingency. The felt relation of a time, a writer, or a particular kind of historical imagination to the fact of contingency informs the way stories are told, in particular the nature of their endings (and not just in the recent past, as Frank Kermode has shown). Postmodernism, though, has been especially invested in the connection between closure and contingency. In an early (1972) statement of postmodern doctrine made in the first issue of *boundary 2*, the postmodern journal he co-founded, William Spanos describes the relationship between closure and contingency after midcentury:

Only after the existentialist philosophers revealed that the perception of the universe as a well-made fiction, obsessive to the Western consciousness, is in reality a self-deceptive effort to evade the anxiety of contingent existence by objectifying and taking hold of "it," did it become clear to the modern writer that the ending-as-solution is the literary agency of this evasive objectification. (152)

The distrust of closure is widely articulated in postmodern thought, early (as in statements by Leslie Fiedler, Ihab Hassan, John Barth, et al.) and late (Linda Hutcheon, Fredric Jameson, Brian McHale, et al.). The story that I will tell through my reading of *Middlesex*, however, is that of the changing nature of that distrust in recent years. What endings mean, and why writers embrace them or avoid them, depends in part on how contingent existence feels and how public discourse and constructions of history deal with that feeling. As a result, events that reawaken a sense of contingency and challenge already constructed narratives—in particular, historical traumas—can affect the shape of literary endings. This is especially the case, I will argue, for historical literature, work whose focus is explicitly on the past and always implicitly, as a result, on the way that

history “ends”—on the way the past leads to the precarious present and, ultimately, the future. Thus, the way *Middlesex* ends should be understood in the context of what ends meant at the time.

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During a ceremony held in Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1991, the fiftieth anniversary of the Japanese attack, President George Bush put the end of the Cold War into what he saw as its proper context: “Now we stand triumphant,” he said, “for a third time this century, this time in the wake of the Cold War. As in 1919 and 1945, we face no enemy menacing our security” (qtd. in Engelhardt, “Victors” 214). The dissolution of the Soviet Union, for Bush, fit easily into the seamless narrative of America’s history as world power. Looking back from this latest “victory,” Bush saw a succession of victorious moments such as the one in which he now believed himself to be living.

American fiction of the 1990s reflects and reflects upon the historical imagination of its times. Much of the character of this imagination—of the ways people told stories about the past—is due to the event that began the decade, the disintegration of the Soviet Union. The 1990s saw not just the end of the international order of the last half-century but also, amid relative peace and prosperity, the fiftieth anniversaries of the events of the world war that preceded it—making for what Cold War historian Paul Boyer calls “the retrospective moment of 1995” (xviii)—and the end-of-an-era sense imparted by the close of a century and a millennium. As a result, the 1990s were a retrospective decade. This retrospection was evident in the number of cultural products that focused on the nation’s past, from the increase in documentary films such as those by Ken Burns and the popularity of books by historians such as Stephen Ambrose and the ubiquitous Doris Kearns Goodwin to war movies such as *Saving Private Ryan*, *The Thin Red Line*, and *Pearl Harbor*, the launch of the History Channel and the growth of the *Biography* series, CNN’s 1998 24-part history of the Cold War, the miniseries *The Sixties*, and decade-specific revivals in popular music and television such as *That Seventies Show*.<sup>2</sup>

But the end of the Cold War was especially encouraging (as many elements of the list above demonstrate) of the specific kind of historical narrative exemplified by Bush’s 1991 speech—namely, the triumphalist: a long-running story of an always righteous, always victorious (or if not

victorious, then unjustly handicapped) nation. This is a way of telling American history older than the nation itself, born when early European settlers saw themselves as new American Adams and their adventure in the New World as divinely protected, their victory assured, their success an example—"a city on a hill."<sup>3</sup> The end of the Cold War fit nicely into this story for many, confirming the superiority of capitalism and liberal democracy, confirming the idea that history made sense and the West was its winner—and for some like Francis Fukuyama, even showing that the world had reached the end of history, insofar as history was driven by ideological struggle. This reading of events helped strengthen the cowboys-and-Indians, "morning in America" sense of the nation that Ronald Reagan championed in the 1980s as a counter to what he perceived as the pessimism of the 1970s.

For some, the events of September 11, 2001, posed surprisingly little challenge to the triumphalist narrative reinvigorated by the end of the Cold War. Instead, it was seen to introduce a new enemy to the West's superior way of life in the amorphous and shape-shifting form of Terror (or Al Qaeda, or Islamic Fundamentalism, or, in a leaden summer 2005 test balloon, Extremism). Just as in the early 1990s many Cold Warriors found a new fight in the Culture Wars, seeing the American Left as the greatest threat to America, many Cold and Culture Warriors found a new fight after 9/11.<sup>4</sup> But for others, awareness of other kinds of narratives was encouraged by 9/11. From many of the subsequent reactions of the US government, including military action, there emerged a story of divergence from righteousness, not to mention victory. Bush the father's characterization of America as without enemies threatening our shores did not describe the state of the nation under the son's administration; the present moment did not, for many, fit into the father's triumphalist narrative. In addition to this resistance to a continuation of post-Cold War triumphalism in the triumphalist response to Terror, there also emerged a story about a different kind of terror—the terror caused by the recognition of contingency. This recognition informs a view of the course of human events as not chartable along the upward line of humankind's inexorable progress toward liberal democracy but rather as heavily featuring randomness and vulnerability.

Many acclaimed American literary novels of the 1990s reflected the history-mindedness of the decade; a good number of them could be seen as reactions to the triumphalist interpretation of the end of the Cold War,

which took the collapse of the Soviet Union under its own weight for US victory over Reagan's "Evil Empire." Some examples are Tim O'Brien's 1994 *In the Lake of the Woods*, Joan Didion's 1996 *The Last Thing He Wanted*, and Don DeLillo's *Underworld*, Thomas Pynchon's *Mason & Dixon*, Philip Roth's *American Pastoral*, and Toni Morrison's *Paradise*, all 1997. Each of these historical novels tells a story about individual characters whose lives are deeply affected by historical forces, and in doing so each explores the ways in which Americans have constructed their historical narratives on the triumphalist template. Taken together, they refute both Fredric Jameson's dismissal of postmodern historical novels as inevitably doomed failures (because ours is, in his words, "an age that has forgotten how to think historically" [*Postmodernism* ix]) and Walter Benn Michaels's negative take on the historical character of most contemporary novels, which he calls "posthistoricist" (26) following Fukuyama, and which he claims are identitarian rather than being concerned with either ideas or the past.<sup>5</sup> And they indicate a further development in the nature of the contemporary novel's attention to history, which, as Linda Hutcheon argued in 1988, had succeeded Joyce's paradigmatically modernist sense of history as a "nightmare" (34).<sup>6</sup> The turn to history in the 1990s, then, is not new, but it may be different.

One significant way in which this turn is different is in the nature of its response to triumphalist history. Another thread of stories that the nation has told itself about itself, probably for as long as it has told the triumphalist one, includes events and facts that are concerned with loss and wrongdoing: what James Berger describes as "the actual and evident imperfections of American history—slavery and its legacies, the violent injustices committed against Native Americans, the war in Vietnam" (134). These facts would disrupt the triumphalist narrative, so they are often elided or interpreted in such a way as to minimize the disruption. In the latter years of the twentieth century, however, counternarratives constructed around these facts gained greater currency.<sup>7</sup> One factor producing this trend is the development and spread of the notion of historical trauma. In light of this notion, the opposed narrative of the American past and present can be thought of, following Berger's formulation, as the traumatic.<sup>8</sup>

Freud borrowed *trauma*, the Greek word for wound, to name the phenomenon of a shocking event that proves unassimilable to conscious-

ness, gets repressed or lost in memory, and presents itself symptomatically in various disruptive ways unless brought to the surface and confronted.<sup>9</sup> The idea of trauma did not apply only to the personal experience of violent or violating events. It also came to be seen as a useful tool for thinking about the collective experience of historical catastrophes, events that occur on a mass scale or receive wide public attention (and so have widespread effects, both immediate and dispersed in space and time), events that are hard to assimilate into memory and understanding and so are elided or effaced in collective memory (and as a result have effects that are further dispersed). People working in this field in psychology and literary and historical studies have found Freud's language and concepts, such as acting out, repetition, and working through, helpful for thinking about national narratives and behaviors.<sup>10</sup>

The adoption of the trauma model for national narratives has been motivated in part by the sense that there have been and continue to be disastrous consequences when historical narratives leave out certain kinds of events or ignore their importance. As Berger, Dominick LaCapra, and others have argued, however, relying on the medical model inherited from Freud can make the traumatic narrative too quick to heal the wounds it uncovers. It's my belief that one cause of this shortcoming in some trauma narratives may be the same as that which revitalized the triumphalist narrative in the 1980s and 1990s—namely, the end of the Cold War, which provided a model of narrative closure difficult to resist. A history whose tragic losses and dark secrets can be uncovered and healed is not as opposed as it might seem to a history in which those things stay hidden, a history that's all about victory and righteousness, a history where everything turns out all right for America in the end. The events of 9/11, which some have found a fit for a narrative of America as innocent victim (and then righteous avenger), have been for others a model of an open wound that needs healing—or closing.

In just this way, Eugenides's *Middlesex* imposes healing closure on what begins as a more open-ended story. Through the magic of eliding and forgetting, *Middlesex* makes things, even traumatic things, turn out all right in the end. The desire for closure at the heart of the historical vision of *Middlesex*, I believe, is common to many aspects of American culture after 9/11.

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*Middlesex* is a long historical yarn spun by Cal Stephanides, an American of Greek descent born to first-generation Greek American parents, who pass down to him a rare genetic mutation that results in his being raised as Calliope. His hermaphroditism goes undiscovered until his teens. Before the discovery, he leads a mostly happy life as a girl; after the discovery, he decides against the surgery his doctor proposes to make his body conform to his rearing, and he cuts his hair and begins to live as a boy. We are told this story by Cal more than two decades after his decision, in the very detailed context of another story spanning three generations and two continents. This larger story is held together not just by the thread of Cal's genealogy (tangled, as it were, by a number of incestuous pairings) but also of his genetics: the mutation responsible for his hermaphroditism is in some sense the hero of this story, what the narrator calls "this rollercoaster ride of a single gene through time," as it survives atrocity, displacement, and war (2).

In the telling of this story, *Middlesex* sets itself up to make a brief for free will against the determining effects of both biology and society. Eugenides's handling of the gender issue, however, undercuts this brief because he resolves his hero's conflict too quickly and too neatly. Calliope decides he is a boy, cuts off the ends of his name and his hair, and because he decides it, readers seem meant to accept it. This exercise of free will, however, strains plausibility. While there is some acknowledgment of the difficulty entailed in changing one's gender identification and presentation, and a small part of the novel details Cal's immediate post-Callie life, this section of the novel is rushed and haphazardly plotted, and the ideas that animate the story earlier are lost. The questions raised in the book thus do not survive the novel's paired resolutions, Calliope's decision in the mid-1970s and the beginning of Cal's first real romantic relationship with a woman, which is made possible by his 2001/2002 telling of the story of his past. While there is much to be said about the novel's treatment of gender and sexuality, what I will focus on here is the fact that its exploration of these issues and the part they play in its hero's life is foreclosed.

*Middlesex* opens: "I was born twice: first, as a baby girl, on a remarkably smogless Detroit day in January of 1960, and then again, as a teenage boy, in an emergency room near Petroskey, Michigan, in August of 1974."

On the next page, after this unconventional twist on a conventional bildungsroman beginning, another generic side of the book is introduced with the phrase, “Three months before I was born.” While telling the story of the family situation immediately prior to the main character’s birth is not unusual for a bildungsroman, what is initiated here is a plunge backward into a family history that occupies almost the first half of the novel. This story is played out against a backdrop of historical events and settings such as the 1922 Turkish massacre of Greeks at Smyrna, Prohibition, Henry Ford era Detroit, and the 1967 Detroit riots. And while *Middlesex* does tell a family story over several generations, it wants to be more than family saga: it intends to engage national history, showing not just a family across time but a family buffeted by historical change.

Because of its present-day frame, *Middlesex* might not appear to be a historical novel. Eugenides himself doesn’t identify it as such; he has said, “it was not conceived as a historical novel. I always think a historical novel continuously remains in the past. This book tries to explain the past and comes up to the present day” (Interview). While the historical novel need not be set in the past entirely or at all, at least according to Lukács’s claims for the novel after Balzac,<sup>11</sup> what is more important here is that *Middlesex* does not exactly come up to the present. Its main action is split between the Stephanides family history, which runs from the early 1920s to the late 1950s, and the life of its narrator from birth until the mid-1970s. Its present-time frame, set in the early years of the twenty-first century, contains the quasi-metafictional story of the narrator’s writing of these other two stories—of the novel *Middlesex*, or most of it—and the concurrent story of his courtship of Julie. But there is a quarter-century gap between the end of the story our narrator tells of his past and the present of the frame. This gap provides a clue, I believe, to the specific nature of this novel’s historical imagination.

The gap is not important because it establishes that the novel is set safely in the past and so really is a historical novel. Nor is it important because it highlights what for many postmodern historical novels has become a staple: the recognition that present concerns impinge on reconstructions of the past. The “truth” of past events is not just ultimately uncapturable, these novels assume, but attempts to capture it are always colored by present-day needs. The present-day frame of *Middlesex* is enough to point that out even without the gap: Cal needs to tell the story of his past in order to function in the present, as his happy second-

chance reunion with Julie at the end of the novel illustrates. The narrator's frequent metafictional admissions that he is taking liberties as he writes a fiction "based on real events," as they say in the police procedurals, reinforce this truth. His history of himself is motivated by particular concerns, as are all histories.

The central importance of the gap for understanding the novel's historical sense lies instead in the nature of the historical events that take place during it. Historical events of the years that *are* narrated by Cal are crucial to the story of the Stephanides family. The immigrant experience of the family; the impact of the Detroit riots on their fortunes; the national malaise, felt before Jimmy Carter named it—their lives in America are touched by historical convulsions and shifts in mood. Very early in the novel, the narrator discusses his father's faith in his ability to influence his planned child's gender through carefully timed conception:

I can only explain the scientific mania that overtook my father during the spring of '59 as a symptom of the belief in progress that was infecting everyone back then. Remember, *Sputnik* had been launched only two years earlier. Polio, which had kept my parents quarantined indoors during the summers of their childhood, had been conquered by the Salk vaccine. . . . In that optimistic, postwar America, which I caught the tail end of, everybody was the master of his own destiny, so it only followed that my father would try to be the master of his. (9–10)

Milton Stephanides lived in an America that seemed able to exercise its will freely and so encouraged individuals (some, anyway, as the section on the riots points out) to think they could successfully exercise their own. His story, however, is told in a different time, after Watergate and the loss in Vietnam, during an economic crisis in which America's dependence on Middle East oil illustrated the distance between its self-sufficient superpower dreams and the world's interdependent reality. At the end of the late chapter in which his father's death is retold, Eugenides writes:

Milton got out before many of the things that I will not include in this story, because they are the common tragedies of American life, and as such do not fit into this singular and uncommon record. He got out before the Cold War ended, before missile

shields and global warming and September 11 and a second President with only one vowel in his name. (512)

Eugenides is careful at these crucial points of his novel, the beginning and the end, to highlight national events and reflect on national moods, and so to alert readers to the connections between these factors and his characters' stories. As Milton got out before the events of the last 30 years, though, so too does *Middlesex*, raising the question of the elided history's connection to the narrator's present. Between 1975 and 2002, a number of events occurred that were important to America's identity and sense of place in the world, including not just the events of the 1970s but also the heating up of the Cold War, in rhetoric and in Afghanistan and Central and South America, the end of the Cold War, and the events of September 11. In other words, the influence of the significant historical "things" that happen between Cal's return home on the occasion of his father's death and his telling of his story—especially, in my view, the fall of the Wall and the fall of the Towers—must inform the way he tells it. But the book won't tell us how.

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One way to think about this novel's relation to history is to examine its imagination of the future, and to do so with reference to the concept of the future anterior as developed mainly by Derrida and also, somewhat differently, by Lacan and Lyotard. Derrida first uses this unusual verb tense in the exergue to *Of Grammatology* for the sense of time it opens up to think about speech acts and writing, the interpretation of literature, and the construction of history:

The future can only be anticipated in the form of an absolute danger. It is that which breaks absolutely with constituted normality and can only be proclaimed, *presented*, as a sort of monstrosity. For that future world and for that within it which will have put into question the values of sign, word, and writing, for that which guides our future anterior, there is as yet no exergue.

(5)

Derrida is here proposing that this dangerous monstrosity is nonetheless a positive possibility; he calls it "a way of thinking that is faithful and at-

tentive to the ineluctable world of the future which proclaims itself at present, beyond the closure of knowledge" (4).

Of the Derridean future anterior, Tony Thwaites writes:

Grammatically, the "will have been" of the future anterior is not at all a matter of "a future determined by what preceded it": that would be a possible—but certainly not even then a necessary—use of the simple future, the "will be." The future anterior is a much stranger tense, of a future which has not yet arrived and is itself yet to be determined, but which determines retrospectively, in its turn, the past which *will have been* for that future. Invoking a past which has itself not yet arrived, or is always in the process of arriving, the future anterior not only describes the empirical delays attendant on any historicity, but also, in its complex textual folding, the very structure of historicity as perpetually renewed wager. (par. 12h)

The future anterior's "that which will have been" points to the past that will only exist once the future arrives. Lyotard and Lacan both adopted it because they wanted to make use of its counterintuitive yet (or, and so) revealing sense of the passage of time, Lacan for the light it can shed on the psyche, Lyotard for his construction of cultural history, in particular of the postmodern. Lyotard defines the postmodern as what happens when "The artist and the writer . . . are working without rules in order to formulate the rules of what *will have been done*" (81). Lacan describes the future anterior this way: "What is realized in my history is not the past definite of what was, since it is no more, or even the present perfect of what has been in what I am, but the future anterior of what I shall have been for what I am in the process of becoming" (63). In both cases, we are, as in Derrida, beyond the closure of knowledge.

In his 1976 lecture "Declarations of Independence," Derrida makes use of his concept of the future anterior when he considers the American Declaration of Independence as an example of the dual power of language to describe and perform: it is "both a *description*, by its representatives, of the prior fact of the American people and their representatives and the very *performance* of this people and its representative signatories" (Beardsworth par. 6). This performance, Derrida says, is an act of invention, carried out through what he calls a "fabulous retroactivity" by which the American people claim to be a people before they have become

one—looking back from the future, it is claimed, they *will have become* a people (*Negotiations* 50). The future anterior here resides especially, for Derrida, in this passage:

We therefore the Representatives of the United States of America, in General Congress assembled, appealing to the Supreme Judge of the world for the rectitude of our intentions, do, in the Name, and by the authority of the good people of these Colonies, solemnly declare and publish that these United Colonies are and of right ought to be free and independent states.

The last line conveys the sense of description of the present and desire for the future: the colonies “are” free and also “of right ought to be” free. Saying it, in a sense, made it so, in that saying it was so enabled action based on the idea that it would be so.

Cal’s moment of self-determination—the moment when he turns his back on his past and proclaims himself male—is a moment that depends on the future anterior. So too does that moment’s twin at the end of the novel, when Cal has reached the end of the retelling of the story of his youth *and is at the beginning of a relationship with Julie*, a relationship that after a false start earlier in the novel now promises to last because Cal has worked through the traumas of the past. These two moments belong to the future anterior because they are constructions of history—Cal’s personal history—that claim to describe a present but really construct a past built upon a wish for the future. Though Callie becomes Cal when she tells her mother and father (in writing) that she is a boy, she is a boy only because she decides to reject her rearing and selectively interpret her ambiguous physiognomy. She cuts her hair, walks like a boy, and names herself with a boy’s name. In the moment that she declares herself male, she begins the process of constructing a history of her life that leads up to the present she imagines for herself. We see the future anterior in Cal’s response to his mother’s question “Don’t you think it would have been easier just to stay the way you were?”: “This is the way I was” (520). Likewise, Cal’s intimation at the end of the novel that he has begun a sustainable relationship—that he has come to grips with who he is through the telling of his life story *and as a result is able in the present to lead a healthy, shared life*—is really a statement less of fact than of hope. And it similarly constructs a past that in the future, it is hoped, will be seen to

have prepared the way for present happiness confirmed by future happiness.

*If* that future is happy. Whether the future will be happy is, in all cases, unknowable, because of the contingent nature of existence. What the idea of the future anterior reminds us is that we do not simply write our histories so that they lead happily to the present in which we find ourselves. That present, in actuality, is similarly unknowable, so we try to see the past leading to how we hope the present will turn out—in the future. As Tony Jackson has remarked concerning the future anterior as it appears in Lacan,

Is it possible to think of ourselves absolutely now, exclusive of some expected direction into the future? So the sense of now emerges from a sense towards the yet to be. So when we recall the past, we are actually projecting, of course upon some more or less noumenal core of the real, an image of what will need to have been in order to bring about who we expect to be.

The book Cal writes tells the story of who he needs to have been in order to bring about the well-adjusted, happy man he expects to be but certainly does not know he will be. The book Eugenides writes does not seem to question Cal's shaping of his narrative; there is no detectable ironic distance between the two.

Cal's too quick, too neat resolution of his gender story and of the issue of hermaphroditism is, then, *Middlesex*'s own, and it is the result of its historical imagination, one that falls prey to the anxieties attendant on our living, to use Frank Kermode's phrase, in "the middest" (7), unable to know the future and often unwilling to deal with the traumatic past—or too willing to tell its story and declare its wounds healed. The ending is rushed, especially for a 500-plus page novel, and simplistic; it happens very quickly, and insists too much on its not being such a big deal: "After I returned from San Francisco and started living as a male, my family found that, contrary to popular opinion, gender was not all that important. My change from girl to boy was far less dramatic than the distance anybody travels from infancy to adulthood" (250). However, this girl-becomes-boy bildungsroman does portray a change more dramatic than adolescence, and often seems to know it, as in its fleeting recognitions of Cal's difficulties in San Francisco, including getting beaten up in Golden Gate Park and working as Hermaphroditus in an underwater

peep show. But it downplays the significance of this change.<sup>12</sup> And it is followed by plot machinations that creak and grind, often implausibly, as in the scheme engineered by Cal's priest uncle (and one-time spurned suitor of his mother) to fake Calliope's kidnapping after she runs off to become Cal, and her father's resulting death in, of all things, a car chase. On a bridge. And it oversimplifies what had been a complex and nuanced exploration of what makes gender and of the history both of the argument between nature and nurture and also of the ways medicine has dealt with hermaphroditism. In the end, the "middle" of its title, which it had so promisingly staked out as its territory early on, is abandoned.

Just as Cal's autobiography and Eugenides's novel tell stories of the past built on the image of a desired yet-to-be, so Americans, ever since before the Declaration, have been telling stories of their national past built on what they believe their nation to be at present, which itself has been only what they have hoped for its future. The telling of these stories requires that the traumas of the past either be elided or confronted. The danger of the confrontation, again, lies in its emphasis on working through. Motivated in cases of historical trauma by a desire to uncover past losses or atrocities that have been elided, the remembering of which is thought to have potential future value not just in national healing but in directing future action, working through can be performed in such a way that the useful historical reminder is dealt with and then put away. The traumatized subject is able, on this view, to domesticate the past through an exercise of free will, to escape its power to determine the future—as *Middlesex* believes Cal does. The problem is that, with the reforgetting of the traumatic event, its potential to remind is lost. Healing the wound, on this view, might be less valuable than leaving it open. But the need to imagine a happy future is powerful, and the constructions of the past that result can seek what might be called closure in their future-oriented motivation: whether the past is seen as free of trauma or full of it, the result can be a view of the past as a closed book, as that which leads to the happy ending that is the present.

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As I've suggested, the trauma that announced the end of the 1990s occurred in September 2001. American optimism and faith in self-determination, in the ability to write one's own destiny, was shaken by these

attacks, so unforeseen and close to home.<sup>13</sup> The happy future assumed to be around the bend after the US found itself the only superpower was harder to assume in such a radically contingent-feeling present; the history that needed to be written to lead from the past to that happy future was going to be hard to write.

But again, people are eager to heal their wounds. The trauma of 9/11 provoked repression, vengefulness, and self-recrimination; most reactions save the last were eager to move past it or use it as motivation for military action. The closure such thinking provides is far more comforting than the alternatives. The attempt to deny the anxiety of contingency that is central to triumphalist narrative—as well as to a traumatic narrative too keen on healing—enables reconstructions of the past that lead to rosy futures, right past uncertain presents. This kind of historical imagination drives *Middlesex*. Eugenides's description of the book as explaining the past and coming up to the present reveals a desire for a past whose traumas can be healed over (in this case, by the working through that literary representation, a kind of written talking-cure, seems to offer) and can be shown to have made possible a happy future. “History is what hurts,” Jameson wrote 25 years ago (*Political Unconscious* 102); history, for Jameson, is an absent cause that can only be seen in its limiting effects. For Eugenides and other contemporary novelists influenced by the strain of trauma thinking too keen on closure, history is what *heals*: it is marked by deeply wounding limit events, whose hurts are healed through narrative.

Seeing history as something to be healed has an effect on how one represents it. In the case of *Middlesex*, it has formal effects that identify it not simply as a postmodern historical novel but as a post-9/11 historical novel. At one point in his account of his early life, Cal writes:

Aside from their blinding brightness, there was another odd thing about Milton's home movies: like Hitchcock, he always appeared in them. The only way to check the amount of film left in the camera was by reading the counter inside the lens. In the middle of Christmas scenes or birthday parties there always came a moment when Milton's eye would fill the screen. So that now, as I quickly try to sketch my early years, what comes back most quickly is just that: the brown orb of my father's sleepy, bearish eye. A postmodern touch in our domestic cinema, pointing up artifice, calling attention to mechanics. (And bequeathing me my aesthetic). (225)

The metafictional touches in *Middlesex* are there to remind us that a creative intelligence is behind its construction of history. As much postmodern fiction has shown, there is always an eye behind the viewfinder and a hand pointing the lens. As the contemporary history of these techniques enters another century, though, the early connections between postmodern techniques and radical epistemological skepticism are less clear. As Hutcheon puts it in her discussion of what she calls the “historiographic metafiction” of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, “Postmodern fiction suggests that to re-write or re-present the past in fiction and in history is, in both cases, to open it up to the present, to prevent it from being conclusive and teleological” (110).<sup>14</sup> Many writers in the last 10 or 15 years have used metafictional techniques popularized by earlier novelists, and while the meanings of formal choices are always hard to pin down, it can be safely said that the radical tang of metafictional technique is not always what it once was.

Nor is it always intended to be. Eugenides does not feel that he is a postmodernist, though Cal claims postmodernism as his own aesthetic and Eugenides himself sees aspects of it in his work. In the interview with Bram van Moorhem he remarks on *Middlesex*’s combination of self-conscious narration and traditional novelistic storytelling, and then makes clear that this does not make him postmodern:

I don’t want to constantly frustrate the reader by taking him down on dead-ends, at the dead-end of literature or something—that doesn’t interest me. I want, in a way, a Classical shape to my books and a pleasing and elegant form to them, which is old-fashioned. But within that, I still have a lot of postmodern play without the continuing sense of relativism that . . . I got so tired of.

One of the dead ends of postmodern play that Eugenides is tired of concerns the literal end—the problematization of closure. While he enjoys the calling attention to mechanics, the pointing up of artifice, he favors what he calls classical shape and elegant form—things surely characterized by clean endings. But as I have argued, the choice to end or not to end has meaning. Again, the distrust of closure so closely identified with postmodernism is a response to the existential confrontation with contingency brought on by the horrors of mid-century; one formal aspect of that response is a refusal of closure, a radical open-endedness. In

contemporary fiction, especially fiction written after the end of the Cold War, that distrust is often specifically informed by the resurgence of the triumphalist narrative inspired by what is taken as American victory; the formal response often takes the shape of reopenings of historical narratives previously closed, in particular unearthings of repressed pasts. This response can sometimes result in an inadvertent repetition of the very failing that inspired it in the first place—the welcoming of closure in the form of the healing that is working through's goal, which manifests itself in the hasty, foreclosing, elision-enabled ending. *Middlesex* further suggests that this repetition of the compulsion toward closure modeled by the end-of-history claims following the end of the Cold War is in recent years intensified by the desire to heal the new wound of 9/11. In the end, Eugenides's novel is chock full of closure. And this closure is not simply a formal tying up of loose ends but also foreclosure: the meaning of the ambiguity of Cal's body, the undecided relative importance of different determining forces on the question of his gender, the ramifications of his choice to exercise his free will—these issues are dropped. The attempt to evade contingency that early theorists of postmodern fiction saw in traditional novel endings is also evident in this sometimes postmodern-seeming novel, but it is evident in a way that is specific to its historical imagination, an imagination itself shaped by its historical context.

Writing a historical novel that asserts the possibility of self-determination after 9/11 can be seen as making a certain kind of sense. A reassertion of American optimism in this context is the understandable result both of the old American ability to construct, from a hoped-for future, a past that leads to it, and also of the contemporary American tendency, especially prevalent after 9/11, to read the hurts of history as available for healing. It is, in the end, an attempt to achieve closure. This closure allows the past to be constructed optimistically, as it is when Eugenides ends his novel with young Cal standing in the doorway of his childhood home, losing track of time, weeping for his father and his past but looking outward and “thinking about what was next”; of course, this optimism relies on the teller's already knowing what is next (as we do, from the frame story). Such construction, as I've tried to suggest in the case of *Middlesex*, can be inadequate. A more useful if less comforting alternative is suggested by Derrida in a dialogue in the 2003 *Philosophy in a Time of Terror*, where he argues that the world will be traumatized by 9/11

not in the present or from the memory of what will have been the past present . . . [but] from the unrepresentable future, from the open threat of an aggression capable one day of striking—for you never know—the *head* of the sovereign state par excellence. (Borradori 98)

The significance of the event here is in the awareness of contingency it brings and in the resistance to healing closure it encourages. The medical model, which sometimes leads trauma theory to uncritically valorize working through, might be the wrong one here. Instead, perhaps especially in light of the figure of autoimmunity that Derrida develops in this dialogue and elsewhere to discuss what he sees as empire's death drive, it might be more useful to mind not the event of wounding but rather the self-wounding repetitions, such as elective war or domestic surveillance. At a time when what will come next seems increasingly unimaginable, American stories that acknowledge the terror of the future and resist imposing closure on the past are becoming increasingly important.

Writing the kind of novel that Eugenides wrote after 9/11 does not only make a certain kind of sense, it may also characterize a moment in literary history after postmodernism. If I'm right that the nature of the distrust of closure changes after the end of the Cold War, and that this modulation of postmodernism's distrust is further spun by the events of 9/11, then the formal evidence offered by *Middlesex* can help point to one defining characteristic of a new moment in American fiction, one in which the stakes of the decision of whether or not to end the old-fashioned way are raised. How high they are raised, and what shape historical narratives will take, only the future, of course, will tell.

## Notes

1. It has also, at the time of this writing, just been named a selection for Oprah's Book Club, prompting a new printing of 750,000 copies ("Oprah").
2. For more on the historical orientation of the 1990s, see Boyer.
3. John Winthrop's phrase, from his sermon "A Modell of Christian Charity" (47). For the American Adam, see Lewis.
4. Todd Gitlin, describing this vacuum and the resulting turn, called it "an enemy crisis" (80); Pat Buchanan called it "a religious war . . . for the soul of America."

5. Michaels actually labels Morrison's approach to history "posthistoricist historicism" (140). While it is true that many of the same writers wrote historical novels earlier in their careers (for example Morrison's *Beloved* [1987], DeLillo's *Libra* [1988], and Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* [1973]), I argue that in many cases the novels of the 1990s represent turns to an explicit self-reflexiveness that enables a questioning and revision of their own past readings of history as expressed in their earlier novels.

6. Hutcheon writes: "There seems to be a new desire to think historically, and to think historically these days is to think critically and contextually" (88).

7. Tom Engelhardt argues in *The End of Victory Culture* that the hold of the triumphalist narrative on the culture began to weaken before the 1990s, and even before the late 1960s and early 1970s, with the war in Vietnam. It began, he contends, with our dropping of the atom bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Victory was not at issue then, but our innocence and rightness were.

8. The idea of trauma can help explain the apparent necessity of forgetting or erasing certain elements of the national past. Berger applies this idea in his analysis of postapocalyptic thought in American literature, film, and public discourse through the 1980s. For more about triumphalism, trauma, and the end of the Cold War, see my essay "Triumph and Trauma."

9. The career of trauma in Freud's thought took a number of turns. Over the course of his work on this notion—from his early *Studies in Hysteria* to the important mid-career *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and the late *Moses and Monotheism*—Freud struggled with how much importance the traumatic event should have in explaining neuroses. In each of these books he first assigned it primary causal force and then swung back to the drives or some other internal or organic factor. Berger summarizes:

All Freud's thinking on trauma manifests this ambivalence regarding the significance of the historical event. Reading Freud, we are tempted to ask, are there events, are there traumas at all? That is, do events in history have consequences—as Freud urges in the first movements of each of his theoretical ventures—or, as he concludes in each of his second movements, are events secondary to desire, instinct, or a form of genetic history? (23)

Despite this ambivalence (though it provides an intriguing parallel for thinking about poststructural thought's own ambivalence regarding the event), Freud's focus on the mechanism of how the psyche deals with the extreme or limit event gave birth to modern trauma studies in the late 1980s and 1990s. Attendant at this birth were: Holocaust studies; the medical institutionalization of post-traumatic stress disorder with the 1980 appearance of *DSM-III* (the third

edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, the main diagnostic reference published by the American Psychiatric Association), which grew out of work with soldiers returned from Vietnam, just as Freud's work on trauma in the 1920s grew out of his treatment of soldiers returned from the First World War; a popular and legal fascination with repressed memory in the 1980s; and the catastrophe-heavy twentieth century, which saw genocides, ethnic cleansing, world wars, and the use of the atom bomb.

10. See Berger; Caruth, *Trauma and Unclaimed Experience*; LaCapra; Herman; Felman and Laub; and Leys.

11. Lukács writes:

This continuation of the historical novel, in the sense of a consciously historical conception of the present, is the great achievement of . . . Balzac. . . . Balzac passes from the portrayal of *past history* to the portrayal of the *present as history*. (81, 83)

12. One interesting take on this aspect of the novel, and more generally on the essentialism of Eugenides's portrayal of gender and sexuality, can be found in Daniel Mendelsohn's review.

13. As John Lewis Gaddis wrote,

Except for Pearl Harbor and a few isolated pinpricks like Japanese attempts to start forest fires with incendiary bombs in the Pacific Northwest in 1944 and 1945, or the Mexican guerilla Pancho Villa's raid on Columbus, N.M., in 1916, the United States has suffered no foreign attack on its soil since British troops captured Washington and burned the White House and the Capitol in 1814. . . . Everybody has airplanes, and everything that lies below them must now be considered a potential target. (B7)

14. For recent revaluations of Hutcheon's ideas about contemporary historical fiction, see Amy Elias, who inserts a new term, "metahistorical romance" (2), into the discussion, and Marcel Cornis-Pope, who lauds what he perceives as a turn to politics after a series of essentially formalist books on postmodernism.

I would like to thank Andrew Hoberek for soliciting my contribution and for his invaluable help reading drafts; Timothy Bewes and Laura Tanenbaum for their feedback on the original MLA talk; colleagues and students at the University of Missouri for offering comments on the version given as a talk to the English Department; Tom Cerasulo for all of his feedback; and Elizabeth Chang, Joanna Hearne, and Donna Strickland for their helpful comments on the final version.

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