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Middlesex by Jeffrey Eugenides (Bloomsbury, R164.95)

Review by Michiel Heyns

Henry James notoriously referred to the long Russian novels, which he regarded as deficient in terms of structure, as loose baggy monsters. It's a term that comes to mind in negotiating the vast, sprawling, meandering tale that is Middlesex.

There are, in fact, at least three tales jostling together in this generous novel. The first is the story of a young Greek couple, fleeing, in 1922, a war-ravaged Smyrna for the new world: a traditional emigration narrative, except for the fact that the couple, Lefty and Desdemona Stephanides, are in fact brother and sister. The narrator, Cal, is the grandchild of this incestuous union, and his story is, genetically speaking, the outcome of theirs: born as a girl, Calliope, he is to discover in time that a recessive gene mutation of the fifth chromosome, reinforced by the incestuous bonding of the grandparents, has bequeathed her/him a "double" set of sexual organs.

This second narrative, then, recounts the difficult childhood and adolescence of Calliope, culmination in her acceptance of her identity as a male teenager. A third, much briefer, narrative deals with the present plight of the now-male narrator in his courtship of a woman he is attracted to.

These three strands of the novel are skilfully intertwined, crossing and recrossing; and if, in a Jamesian sense, there is a certain looseness in the weave, they are nevertheless all pertinent enough to the novel's sense of the immense complexity of a single human destiny.

Eugenides takes advantage of the Greek roots of his story to suggest, in mock-epic fashion, that his hero's story is fated, like the destiny of some Greek hero, except that here the agent of Fate is genetics: "Sing now, O Muse, of the recessive mutation on my fifth chromosome! Sing how it bloomed two-and-half centuries ago on the slopes of Mount Olympus . . . Sing how it passed down nine generations . . ." Throughout, the narrator links his own history to the larger historical moments of the time. One of the incidental delights of the novel is the recreation of Detroit: the gritty, polluted, noisy energy of the twenties, the seamy world of Prohibition, eventually the racial tensions of the sixties.

The central narrative, however, remains Calliope's largely unconscious search for her real identity, her vague sense that she is not like other girls. In this respect, the novel is a highly original coming-of-age narrative, with the protagonist having to find and choose her own destiny. On the point of being "normalised," through hormones and surgery, by the suave but sinister Dr Luce, who sees in Calliope proof of his contention that gender is determined solely by socialisation, Calliope flees and adopts her new identity as Cal, a teenage boy.

Cal's flight across America takes the novel off in yet another direction, as the tight family drama opens up into a picaresque novel-of-the-road, with young Cal being taken up and taken advantage of by a succession of helpful and/or exploitative strangers, to end up in a freak show in San Francisco. This section, coming some 450 pages into the narrative, may strike the impatient reader as an indulgence; but Eugenides, possibly sensing this danger, takes pains to connect Cal's flight with that of his grandparents: "My grandparents had fled their home because of a war. Now, some fifty-two years later, I was fleeing myself. I felt that I was saving myself just as definitively. . . I was becoming a new person, too, just like Lefty and Desdemona, and I didn't know what would happen to me in this new world to which I'd come."

The sense of a new world is, in fact, the connecting thread that may redeem the novel from the Jamesian peril of bagginess. The occurrence at the centre of the novel of Middlesex, the new home of the now-prosperous Stephanides clan, provides the clue: a product of the Prairie school of architecture, Middlesex is a spare, modern structure, the converse of everything the now aged Desdemona clings to, as she clings to the silkworm box she brought with her on her wedding voyage: "Everything about

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Middlesex spoke of forgetting and everything about Desdemona made plain the inescapability of remembering."

By the end of the novel, the house has become the proper metaphor for the possibilities of a truly new world, " a place designed for a new type of human being, who would inhabit a new world. I couldn't help feeling, of course, that that person was me, me and all the others like me."

Ultimately, then, the novel challenges the most fundamental basis of fiction, the gendering of its characters. As self-accepting hermaphrodite, Cal becomes also the figure of the novelist claiming insight into all his characters, male and female alike, "the ability to communicate between the genders, to see not with the monovision of one sex but in the stereoscope of both."

This was, of course, the gift of Tiresias, the blind seer who had been turned into a woman and then back into a man, and by having his protagonist act the part of Tiresias in a school play, Eugenides, here as elsewhere, invites comparison with the tragic notions of Greek drama. But against the determinism of Greek tragedy and biology alike he asserts the human right of choice: "free will is making a come-back. Biology gives you a brain. Life turns it into a mind."

Recounting the sad end of his father, the narrator comments laconically: " A real Greek might end on this tragic note. But an American is inclined to stay upbeat."

So, by the end of the novel, the epic journey has been completed, from the tragic vision of the old world to the upbeat tempo of the new. In the midst of remembering, this hugely inventive novel asserts the need to forget.