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# Begetting the Novel; Or: On the Conception and Reproduction of a Literary Genre

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**Abstract**

By means of an in-depth, multi-level metafictional analysis of an exemplary case study, Jeffrey Eugenides' Pulitzer-winning novel *Middlesex* (2002), this contribution aims at testing the historiographical and critical affordances of the 'literature/generation nexus', i.e., the culturalist reading of literature through the phenomenology and history of generations, and vice versa. The study's purpose is a twofold one. It firstly and generally aims at exploring the metalinguistic tools offered by this methodology, with a view to identifying and solidifying key critical tropes, such as tradition vs. innovation, ancestry vs. evolution, heritage vs. transformation, recessiveness vs. dominance, perpetuation vs. discontinuity, etc. Secondly, and more specifically, it seeks to shed light on the conception, reproduction, birth and growth of the novel form itself as a privileged creature in the modern generational (as well as cultural) ecosystem. The semantic intertwining of 'genre', 'gender' and 'genius' displayed by the examined case study – a chain of meanings that is actually among the most fruitful heritage of the Latin term *generāre* ("to beget") – will be showcased as a prominent aspect of the novel form as a "synthesis of the heterogeneous" (Ricoeur 1984), and as a privileged laboratory for practices of contamination, hybridisation, cross-fertilisation (Bakhtin 1979), since its very inception in the early eighteenth century.

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## 1. Genre, gender and genius

One fecund point about the "literature/generation nexus", i.e., the culturalist reading of literature through the phenomenology and history of generations, and vice versa (Consonni, Cleto 2023), is that it challenges us to think of texts - and more specifically of genres - in terms that are both materially sociocultural (think of processes of production, consumption and representation) as well as metaphorically organicistic (think of dynamics of creation, filiation and reproduction amongst authors, ideas and writings). Indeed, there is a distinct heuristic advantage to conceptualising literature in such amphibious terms, namely, that it provides us with some plastic metalanguage for crystallising a number of forever fluctuating critical tropes, such as tradition *vs*. innovation, ancestry *vs*. evolution, heritage *vs*. transformation, recessiveness *vs*. dominance, perpetuation *vs*. discontinuity, etc.

Last but not least, which is what specifically concerns this contribution, the literature/generation nexus may help bring into focus the formidable semantic intertwining of 'genre' *vs*. 'gender' *vs*. 'genius' that is amongst the most fruitful modern bequests of the Latin lemma *generāre* ("to beget"), and that has characterised the novel form since its very inception in the eighteenth century. Interestingly, the issues of genre (i.e., a shared repertoire of solutions meant for symbolic representation, communication and production), genius (i.e., the achievement of individual artistic creation, textual innovation and/or aesthetic excellence), and gender (i.e., an avowed or ascribed strategy for the construction, expression, representation or imposition of a specific trait of people's subjectivity and identity) come together in a transformational chain of dichotomies which has been resonating for quite some time in Western culture. Especially when it comes to what is probably the most flexible, most generous of all literary forms: the novel.

An entirely "new province of writing" (Fielding 1749: 88) – think of its nearly amateur origins with such authors as Defoe and Richardson (Watt 1957; Davis 1983; McKeon 1987) –, the novel is a genre that almost "anybody can write", even "some desperado with barely a nurtured dream" (DeLillo 1991: 159). A genre that was born hungry and aspiring enough to encompass and process "real things" with "plots and fictions", "taking the world narrowly into itself" (*ibid*). and reconfiguring it into a wide-ranging catalogue of morphologies, all of which have ever since kept expanding the genre's family free, regardless of their being rudimentary or sophisticated, ideologically progressive or reactionary, reminiscent of tradition or rooted in the here-and-now of the rising (or fading) industrial bourgeoisie. A genre whose appetite for individuals, identities and objects has ever since fed off the material, social and cultural movements of the modern world, irrespective of their historical relevance, collective or personal resonance, which it is sometimes capable of turning it into "[s]omething so angelic it makes your jaw hang open" (*ibid.*).

Come to think of it, the cultural history of the novel is perhaps in itself a self-conscious tale of genealogical functions and terms, for the relationships between works, authors and their material and symbolic contexts are indeed often conceptualised in terms of kinship. Think of legitimate, trueborn novels, such as for instance the ones by Henry Fielding or Charles Dickens, of orphaned (anonymous) and foster (under pseudonym) novels, or of cadet, adopted, foundling, renegade or disowned novels, entering or leaving corpora or traditions, etc. What I wish to pursue in this study is, however, an investigation of the novel itself as an eminently 'bastard' genre: as the genre, that is, that has shown the greatest interest in – and talent for – formal and epistemological contamination, hybridisation, cross-fertilisation (Bachtin 1979; Kristeva 1977), whereby its key affordance is its exogenous capacity to coalesce a potentially endless (and provably restless) spectrum of relations, conflicts and transformations into the flexible bonds and boundaries of its forms, and to cognitively speculate on such a manoeuvre, to such an extent as to become a dominant consumption genre across contexts and times.

As memorably phrased by Paul Ricoeur, the novel is an unrivalled tool of cultural production when it comes to configuring reality into a new "synthesis of the heterogeneous", and to generate, "at the higher level of a metalanguage", a kind of understanding of the world that is ultimately and paradoxically rooted in text-internal (as well as context-sensitive) formalisation (Ricoeur 1984: IX). As opposed to the virginity of the poetic word and its privileged, univocal relationship to the poetised object, the novel's represent-

ative mission is mainly achieved by virtue of its being compromised, from the very outset, with the complex opacity of novelised world, for the genre itself rejoices in dissonance, in polyphony and metamorphosis, i.e., in incorporating and reconfiguring the most divergent – multiperceptual, multilingual, multidiscursive – stimuli (Bakhtin 1975: 106). But above all, the novel is never hesitant to be *in the middle* of such vectors and pressures, to literally, structurally, and synchronically textualise them.

In what follows, I deal with the novel as the rarely pure and never simple offspring of its inherent tensions, including those generated by its self-definition as a literary genre in 'biological' competition (and cross-breeding) with the other modern progeny of the Latin keyword *generāre*. In particular, I will explore the intricacies of genre, gender and genius through a multi-level formal analysis of an exemplary case, Jeffrey Eugenides' programmatically titled *Middlesex* (2002). By scrutinising its composite narrative voice and stylistic genome, its epistemological inheritance and historiographical kinship, as well as the gendered idea of literary hybridisation it elaborates on, I will look into the conception, reproduction, birth and growth of the novel as a privileged creature in today's generational and cultural ecosystem.

## 2. A 'well-begotten' novel

The much-awaited outcome of a nine-year long literary gestation, and of as many rewrites, Jeffrey Eugenides' *Middlesex* came into this world as an international case. The recipient of the 2003 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, the novel was the literary wunderkind of the noughties, in reason of its significant birthweight, conspicuous ambitions, talkative style, and compelling subject matter. It is the picaresque, mock-heroic, first-person coming-of-age memoir of Calliope Stephanides, a character whose genetic condition matches the work's title: a third-generation descendant of Greek immigrants, (s)he is an intersex person, born with an ambiguous genital configuration that is first interpreted as female, but with puberty takes on an ever clearer male character. At fourteen, Calliope thus oscillates between the "biology" of sex and the "alias" of gender (2002: 443; henceforth referred to as M), between the 'outside' of a female socialisation-induced phenotype, and a male genetic 'inside', losing the identity (s)he had hitherto acquired, and having to fashion a brand-new one out of thin air. And yet, what exactly is inside or outside individual identity? Does education not shape people as much as biology? How much of us is a state of nature or a surface feature of a cultural process? And why are these originating factors generally read as antagonists? Why not hypothesise 'mixtures' thereof, a.k.a. more unstable and problematic combinations lying *in the middle* of the spectrum, oscillating between the apexes of the nature-nurture debate?

Despite the critical hype it instantly generated as a (*frankly*) self-congratulatory celebration of existential discomfort and representational rebellion, *Middlesex* does appear – some twenty years after its consecration – to deserve a re-reading from the specific standpoint of the novel as a workshop of cultural generation and generational reproduction. Indeed, in many respects Eugenides' work can be said to anatomise the genetic code of the genre itself, and to chart out the very notion of what a novel ultimately is: a dominant product of cultural and morphological bastardy – of heterogeneity, contamination and metafiction. Thematically speaking, *Middlesex* is a multigenerational family novel and a rite of passage turning a docile Midwestern girl, Callie, into a *him*: Cal, a dark teenager destined to on-the-road adventures in California, to pursue a diplomatic career in reunited Berlin, and there to write, as a forty-year-old male-identified hermaphrodite, his memoirs, i.e., the novel itself. The migratory adventures of Desdemona and Lefty, Cal's Greek grandparents, and the Fordist rise of her/his parents, Milton and Tessie, showcase metamorphosis as the novel's all-pervasive fil rouge. Emigrating from Anatolia to Detroit, Cal's grandparents evolve from siblings (and silkworm farmers) to spouses (and factory workers), while her/his parents, in turn second cousins, complete the adaptation process by turning into successful restaurateurs. (*All of which events are interconnected with Cal's genetic condition, as well as with Eugenides' own biography*).[1]

More broadly, the novel is concerned with the ongoing hybridism typical of any existential condition or situation that finds itself oscillating between places, roles or identities; namely, with the incompleteness, the plurality, the volatility – the no-longer and not-yet *je ne sais quoi* – inherent to the 'middle-sex' position, to *any* middle position, actually. If it is litera-

ture's task to confront the unknown, to plunge into an underground world, to sink in transformations, then "writing about the transmission of a genetic mutation" made it "sensible and also incumbent [...] to reiterate the transition in terms of the literary form" (Bedell 2002). Which explains the novel's double soul: conceived as a story – flamboyant, clownish and bohemian in spirit – about the fluctuations of gender identity vis-à-vis the alleged stability of biological sex, it makes the sex *vs.* gender dichotomy an opportunity to reflect on any unstable, impermanent or incomplete ontology, as if the narrative pact included the question, *What do we (really) talk about when we talk about gender?* Indeed, this cognitive purpose is pursued on three interconnected diegetic levels.

Firstly, the novel's history and geography extend from half-Greek-and-half-Turk 1922 Smyrna to the hypothetical melting pot of early-twentieth-century Detroit, to post-WWII Koreas, to 1974 Cyprus and reunified Berlin, where Cal eventually writes his memoirs, touching on "all the places in the world that are no longer one thing or the other" (M: 363). A lead motif in the work thus seems to be the intricate network of relationships that constitutes contemporary subjectivity. Secondly, the intersex protagonist appears as a stratification of classical and modern myths (Hermaphroditus, Tiresias, Orlando, Herculine Barbin), literary gender-bending and gender sociology.[2] Endowed with an exceptional ability to "communicate between the genders, to see not with the monovision of one sex but in the stereoscope of both" (M: 269), Cal is placed in an obviously implausible as much as emblematic existential position that is a pivotal crossroads in the fictionalisation of the nature-nurture debate.

Finally, and interestingly, a jigsaw-style metafictional apparatus is immediately apparent in Eugenides' synchro-diachronic juxtaposition of heterogeneous narrative models, from the wonderful canon of Homer, Sophocles, Ovid and Virgil to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century epic (Henry Fielding, Laurence Sterne, George Eliot's *Middlemarch*) to modern and postmodern mythopoeia (James Joyce's *Ulysses*, T.S. Eliot's *Waste Land*, Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, as well as Lev Tolstoj, Günther Grass, Joyce Carol Oates, Saul Bellow, J.D. Salinger, Vladimir Nabokov, Philip Roth, etc). This is mostly evident in the narrator's *dictum*, an eclectic-and-solemn first-person fusion of end-of-millennium intertextual/citationist reflexivity and eighteenth/nineteenth-century-reminiscent "narrability" (Barthes 1966). Which, in Eugenides' opinion, makes *Middlesex* "a kind of novelistic genome" (Foer 2002), whereby traditional prose accents recreate the classics' formal elegance, while a constellation of intra- and extradiegetic mirrorings clarifies its postmodernist matrix. Think of the Stephanides-Eugenides parallel (same age, same Greek origins, both from Detroit and writing in 2001 Berlin); Cal describing his "Roman-coinish" face (M: 198) along the lines of Eugenides' own androgynous profile (properly printed on the novel's back cover); 'Middlesex' also being the Stephanides mansion in suburban Detroit. (*What else, the author speculates in an interview, could be expected from a novelist with the same name as T.S. Eliot's "Smyrna merchant"?*)[3]. And may we add: doesn't this conflation of meanings happily resonate with the semantic evolutionary chain (and 'genial' expectations) engendered by *Eu-genides*, a 'well-begotten' Greek-American novelist whose alter ego, Calliope, a.k.a. the Muse of poetry, in turn identifies with Tiresias, the intersex seer bearing witness to the fate of "Mr Eugenides, the Smyrna merchant" in T.S. Eliot's *Waste Land*?[4]

Although *Middlesex* simultaneously elaborates on all three levels, thus pointing towards a poetics of global hybridism, in what follows I address the novel's most revealing level: its metafictional apparatus. On the one hand, it seems indisputable that Cal's autobiography, an incredibly ambitious "hyphenate-American" fresco (Mendelsohn 2002) revolving around a key epistemological crossroads such as the nature *vs.* architecture of subjectivity, has a programmatically Bakhtinian narrative structure that is allegedly not rectilinear but "circular" (M: 20). On a superficial level of reading, this seems to make the novel formally similar to those "Germanic train-car constructions like, say, 'the happiness that attends disaster'" (M: 217). But one cannot help wondering if, and to what extent, this explicitly 'well-begotten' novel – with its obviously calculated diegetic surfaces, its eye-catching metafictional geometry – is *really* able to innovate a hyper-stylised, hyper-sophisticated form of literary reflexivity (*widely reified, by the way, by the novel form when still in its infancy, as we shall see*) by contaminating it with an urgent political preoccupation

such as the nature-nurture debate. In other words, is this beloved child of a novel, avowedly born with a "silver spoon",[5] ultimately able to incarnate the radical bastardy that is the cultural and morphological birthmark of the genre? More precisely, getting closer the methodological focus of this paper, how does *Middlesex*'s genealogical theme respond to the pressure of the sociocultural and organicistic tensions inherent to the literature/generation nexus, and how does it fit into the cultural history of the novel form, which the nexus itself clearly contributes to draw?

There are two aspects worth analysing in this respect, to which the following sections are devoted. Firstly, a first-person narrator that, by intertwining several traditional models, builds a metanarrative frame positing Calliope, since her/his very material conception, as a problematic hinge between the issues of subjectivity and textuality. Secondly, a narrative structure that works like a palimpsest of diegetic models arranged in a historical compendium of Western literature, or as Eugenides himself has it, "a kind of novelistic genome" (Foer 2002).

### 3. A eugenic narrator

Calliope's genetic condition resembles, in itself, a narrative experiment, combining the teleological determination of biology, i.e., a modern version of "the Ancient Greek notion of fate" transplanted "into our very cells", with the imponderable arbitrariness of experience, which makes 30,000 genes into not simply "a brain", but "a mind" (M: 479). If an individual's chromosomal heritage seems to recall the notion of destiny (*or perhaps Calvinist predestination?*), personal identity intertwines such determinism with a marked component of chance, brought about by the arbitrariness of self-fashioning. The novel thus sets out to elaborate on identities, genealogies, and the opposing forces of hereditariness and acquisition, through the use of a narrator that is also irreducibly composite. Alternating the first-person retrospection of forty-year-old male Cal with the half-faded third-person simple past of Callie's schoolgirl days, Calliope's autobiography appears as a rhythmic oscillation "between the print of genetics and the Wite-Out of surgery" (M: 417).[6] Calliope's voice is an "impossible" one (Foer 2002), just as impossible was the first-person-plural narrator in Eugenides' debut novel, *The Virgin Suicides*.[7] But the vocal scale in *Middlesex* is even more heterogeneous, incorporating essay-writing (sociology, sexology and cultural history, mimicking in particular Michel Foucault's style), film language (spatial relationships abound, such as montage, freeze frames or slow motion), and, as mentioned above, an overtly self-reflexive and metafictional scaffolding that pivots on the tradition *vs*. innovation, heritage *vs*. transformation – or, more precisely, classic *vs*. postmodern – dichotomy.

Poised halfway between fate and chance, Calliope cannot but embrace a hybrid narrative style, as s/he zigzags between divergent narrative modes that can, with tolerable approximation, be traced back to the twofold origins of the eighteenth-century humoristic novel. The mock-heroic model of Henry Fielding's zero-focus *Tom Jones* (1749), clearly recognisable behind Calliope's Olympic, self-mocking omniscience, is contaminated with Laurence Sterne's fragmentary and aporetic *Tristram Shandy* (1760-67), which in turn inspires Eugenides' idiosyncratic and parodistic use of an impertinent as much as unreliable first-person narrator. To be clearer, Calliope can easily sing a pseudo-Homeric invocation to the Muse, in Fielding's solemn 'puppeteer' style ("Sing me, o Muse, of the recessive mutation on my fifth chromosome! [...] Sorry if I get a little Homeric at times. That's genetic, too"), and maliciously decline, only a few pages later, any responsibility for the reliability of the story s/he is telling, pretty much in contumacious Sternean fashion: "Of course, a narrator in my position (prefetal at the time) can't be entirely sure about any of this" (M: 4, 9).

Despite their emblematic disparities, Fielding and Sterne are however extreme instantiations of a unified (and fairly extended) spectrum of diegetic possibilities, i.e., thise composed by the self-conscious narrator (Booth 1961). A humoristic device inherited by the eighteenth-century novel from Cervantes, Furetière and Scarron, the self-conscious narrator exposes the process of selection, omission and articulation of events as anything but discreet or silent, when not explicitly framed by metafictional commentary (which indeed happens quite often). Calliope thus reclaims her/his eclectic descent from an odd couple of disparately original and immensely influential progenitors of the novel form as we nowadays know it, that is to say, as a quintessentially voracious

and transformative genre. Fielding's infallible 'narrative watchmaking' – which in *Tom Jones* translates into a sophisticated counterpoint between the interventions of Providence and the accidents of Fortune, and into a structure made of an irrefutable beginning, a succession of interlinked ordeals, and a temporally as well as causally geometrical conclusion –, is thus alternated with Sterne's whimsical and nebulous syntax of the human intellect. *Tristram Shandy* indeed tells no proper story, but a "life" (not Tristram's, in fact, but his uncle Toby's life) and "opinions" (not Tristram's, but his father Walter's opinions), which triggers a melan-*comic* dialectic between the 'natural' randomness of worldly circumstances and the designed 'artificiality' of autobiography, which – precisely in order to re-order life's triviality, fortuitousness and banality – ends up (apparently) violating any idea of narrative order whatsoever (Consonni 2012).[8]

Only superficially irreconcilable, Fielding and Sterne's models are in real fact complementary and interdependent, for they both elaborate on the ductile, transient and metamorphic relationship between chance and fate, or better still, between Arbitrariness and Necessity. They both speculate on the novel as the result of a structural interplay between the random, fragmentary discontinuity of subjective experience and the coherent symbolic mediation that narrative morphology casts upon it. A "synthesis of the heterogeneous", i.e., an "integrating dynamism that draws a unified and complete story from a variety of incidents", narrative form is a "temporal whol[e] bringing about a synthesis" of "circumstances, goals, means, interactions, and intended or unintended results", transforming disorganised "variety into a unified and complete story" (Ricoeur 1984: 8). If Calliope is conceived – *à la* Fielding – at the behest of Necessity, through the supposed determinism of eugenic selection ("a map of ourselves" that "dictates our destiny", M: 37), and more specifically through the use of a basal thermometer which, according to Uncle Pete, would give Milton and Tessie a daughter,[9] her/his very birth introduces the Sternean leitmotif of the whole novel, i.e., the complications of Arbitrariness, as exemplified by people's sexuality and identity (216). Later on, when Calliope's genital anomaly is discovered, no doubt whatsoever will be left about genetics being "a crapshoot, entirely" (119).

*Middlesex* however shows no in-depth incarnation of either eighteenth-century matrix. On the one hand, Fielding inspires a chain of coincidences and fortuitous events that take place in wonderful Homeric/Ovidian fashion. Think of the "Simultaneous Fertilization" begetting Milton and Tessie, "a hundreds-to-one odds" event occurred after watching a play on the Minotaur, i.e., "about a hybrid monster" (M: 107); or of a mysterious little girl, appearing at church "that one day and never again" in front of Tessie, for the apparent "sole purpose of changing my mother's mind" in regard to the use of a basal thermometer so as to influence Calliope's sex (15). On the other hand, just like a clone of Sterne's cinematic antihero, Calliope raises the curtain on the very act of her/his own conception, swoops in behind the scenes of family vicissitudes, freezes her/his ancestors' action in *tableaux vivants* that work as a playful pretext to provide readers with metanarrative explanations and comments,[10] only to actually enter the diegetic stage (i.e., be born) halfway through the novel.

But it is a mutual reduction of complexity – a paradoxical *non-violation* of the original types – that actually characterises Calliope's voice. Think, for example, of how Fielding's dialogues with the reader are expanded into a conspicuous apparatus of self-reflexive captions that seems however to neglect, or forget, its deep – dialectically necessary, structurally vital – connection with a textual kernel of opacity, or secret, if you will, which in the case of *Tom Jones* was the hero's unknown lineage. (*A secret that Fielding rigorously preserved just below the surface of the text, never a prey to the flattery of* bavardage *and, indeed, kept undisclosed for nearly one thousand pages, which is how long the seduction between narrator and reader lasts).*[11] Why then incorporate, one may wonder, so many self-congratulatory comments? Why always anticipate events, even those that will not be mentioned in due course? Or elucidate the nickname "That Obscure Object of Desire" by giving the full plot of Buñuel's film? Just like the architect of the eponymous house, home of the Stephanides family, *Middlesex* does not seem to believe in the concept of *door*, "of this thing that s[wings] one way or the other" (M: 258),[12] granting or blocking the reader's cognitive access to a textual space, but only in self-reflecting surfaces that favour a rhizomatic network of instantaneous references, easily accessible and interruptible at any time, rather

than an integrated (ordered, layered) system of meaningful narrative relations. Calliope's voice thus ends up sounding like a form of ventriloquism that, by theatrically designing a eugenic narrator, leaves the original models unaltered, without the structural tension of a 'middle'.

Think, also, of what happens to *Tristram Shandy*'s typical sinuosity. Sterne's plot opens in 1718, ends in 1713 and meanwhile tangles back and forth in time, following patterns that are formally complex as much as they are spatiotemporally rigorous (Consonni 2012). But after an opening flashback, i.e., Desdemona and Lefty's escape from Anatolia, an essentially anecdotal narrative line follows a cumulative development, with only a time shift (an ellipsis) of about ten years in Milton and Tessie's childhood, after which the two of them are teenagers "on a summer evening of 1944" (M: 167). From there on, events follow a strictly chronological order. In addition, Calliope's cunning dismissal of Desdemona ("I allowed [her] to slip out of my narrative because, to be honest, in the dramatic years of my transformation, she slipped out of my attention most of the time", 521-22) or report of Milton's death (one of those "common tragedies of American life, [which] as such do not fit into this singular and uncommon record", 512), does not have any of the formal intelligence – of the coherent and cogent chronological short-circuit – with which Sterne eliminates and reinstates the character of Yorick.[13] Though enveloped by the narrator's exotic, histrionic voice, these are substantial shortcomings that become apparent when Eugenides' novel is contextualised within the literary genealogy of the subgenre, i.e., the humoristic novel, from whose repertoire all its metafictional paraphernalia is derived.

Interestingly, however, one may claim that, to some extent, *Tristram Shandy* itself emblematically seems to christen Eugenides' work. *Middlesex* opens with an unmistakably Sternean (albeit undeclared) self-reflexive frame, about ten pages long, that by setting the stage before Calliope's birth (i.e., the basal thermometer experiment, etc.), summons an epistemological problem that has really always been at the heart of the novel as a genre (Said 1975): *how to begin?* Which is not an insignificant problem in a novel preoccupied with the begetting of new generations, of individuals as well as of cultural products. And even more so when the novel itself declares its direct descent from a literary age such as the eighteenth century, which established nothing less than the rationale for the genre itself. Think of *Tristram Shandy*'s well-known first sentence: "I wish either my father or my mother, or indeed both of them, as they were in duty both equally bound to it, had minded what they were about when they begot me" (Sterne 1760-69: 1). The traditional *ab ovo* beginning – Fielding's typical beginning, to be clear, which sets the scene for the ensuing plot design –[14] is parodied by Sterne's *literal ab ovo*, or rather licentious *ab semine* beginning, i.e., a *coitus interruptus*: "Tristram's misfortunes began nine months before ever he came into the world" (3). According to Wolfgang Iser (1988), by putting the narrator's account of her/his very conception before her/his actual coming into this world, Sterne plays with the rhetorical assumptions underlying the symbolic act of begetting a novel. Far from inaugurating a diegetic teleology, Tristram's birth is already the (non-deterministic) effect of a (non-systematic) action-and-reaction chain, which triggers an *ad infinitum* reverse construction whose sole purpose is to magnify (and thus flaunt) the normally tacit assumptions of a 'good' tale (Shklovsky 1929). Selecting a narrator, in fact, is equivalent to creating something that, not unlike a human being, would otherwise be inconceivable.

Indeed, through a parergonal opening chapter that is eugenically titled "The Silver Spoon", *Middlesex* borrows from *Tristram Shandy* the idea of interweaving the organicism (or 'naturalness') of biological conception with the tradition (or 'artificiality') of novel writing. Which, on a metafictional basis, implies the cross-fertilisation of genetics and literature, or, if you will, of nature and nurture, "biology" and "alias" (M: 443). It is actually through the image of an *egg* – the primordial nucleus, sphere or germ, the perfect seed carrying a chromosomal heritage ready to be fertilised and transform into new life – that *Middlesex* conveys the idea of hybridisation as a *common law of generation* that orchestrates human procreation and literary filiation alike. But this image is, once again, retrieved from *Tristram Shandy*. In Sterne's time, the ancient embryological theory of Preformation still held that the conception of a new individual would take place not as the progressive transformation and specialisation of previously unformed material (i.e., a female cell fertilised by male gametes, which

is what C.F. Wolff's epigenetic theory brought forth as of the 1760s onwards), but as predetermined growth of miniature body parts that were already perfectly present in the *homunculus*, i.e., the tiny prototype of a human being supposedly located either in ovaries, or (more frequently) in spermatozoa.[15] Completely misreading the transformational mechanism of reproduction, this odd theory appears to be perfectly antithetical to hybridisation. Which showcases the opposition between Preformation's rigid fate and the much more nuanced interaction of fate and chance in epigenesis, whereby the determination inherent to a specific and limited genetic heritage is altered by the unpredictable randomness with which two gene pools hybridise and start their morphological process towards a new human being. And yet, Eugenides refers the *homunculus* when telling about Calliope's conception.

Is this a contradiction? Quite the contrary. It is the novel's greatest strength: through the cunning artificiality of an anachronism, *Middlesex* ironically resumes a conjecture that had already been ridiculed by Sterne.[16] With reference to the history of creation in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, in the chapter titled "Ex Ovo Omnia" a metaphorical equation is drawn between human reproduction, the work of silkworms, whose yarn is the result of a transformative process that also originates from eggs, and the unfolding of the narrative thread, which in turn generates the yarn, or *textum*, of literary writing. The egg image thus takes on a composite embryological meaning, as a new individual's principle of genetic constitution and as the primordial germ of his/her narrative formation, i.e., the discursive core of his/her identity's cocoon. Opening with Desdemona smuggling silkworm eggs to America, the story winds through a celebration of the silk thread that, throughout the novel, will create the Stephanides' genealogical tapestry. Embryos and silk threads, begotten individuals and begotten novels are thus a recurring association, both in the intradiegetic and, in line with Sterne's model, the metafictional universe. Think of young Desdemona seeking destiny's signs in her silkworms' worldly wisdom (M: 5); of the circular wedding dance, "spinning the cocoon of [her and Lefty's] life together" (68) as they cross the Atlantic; or of how the worm box itself, now battered and stripped of its original function, is entrusted with the relics of her memory at the end of the story (522).

Most importantly, the egg metaphor also has a structural relevance. As Calliope embarks on the digression taking Desdemona and Lefty to Detroit in the chapter entitled "The Silk Road", s/he compares the legendary discovery of silk in the third millennium B.C. by the Chinese princess Si-Ling-chi to her/his own imminent narrative path: "Like her I unravel my story, and the longer the thread, the less is left to tell. Retrace the filament and you go back to the cocoon's beginning in a tiny knot, a first tentative loop" (M: 63). Once the digression is circularly accomplished, in "Ex Ovo Omnia" Calliope resumes the account of her/his own conception, relying precisely, as mentioned above, on the *homunculus*, that is to say, on a theory (allegedly) elaborated by biologist Jan Swammerdam in 1669, through the microscopic anatomical dissection of an insect called *Bombyx mori*, which is nothing but – *what else could it be?* – "a silkworm" (199).[17] "In the same way, I like to imagine my brother and me", Calliope's impossible prenatal insight goes, "floating together since the world's beginning on our raft of eggs", "inside a transparent membrane, each slotted for his or her (in my case both) hour of birth" (M: 199). After this, the curtain rises again on Greek Easter 1959, when (egg-based) family celebrations are suddenly interrupted by a long-awaited signal, a slight rise in Tessie's temperature due to imminent ovulation. There follow "a billion sperm" swimming "upstream, males in the lead", carrying "not only instructions about eye color, height, nose shape, enzyme production", but "a story, too", "a long white silken thread spinning itself out" ever since that day "two hundred and fifty years ago, when the biology gods, for their own amusement, monkeyed with a gene on a baby's fifth chromosome" (210). "Slippery as a yolk", the omniscient *homunculus* dives into Tessie's womb and then "headfirst into the world" (211). But the bond between embryos, silk threads and diegetic threads remains unbroken, for like the eggs smuggled from China to Anatolia three millennia after their discovery, a rebellious gene is surreptitiously transmitted in the new baby's gene pool by his grandparents' incestuous union. *Et cetera.*

That a caricatural conception exactly opposite to hybridisation should be used to convey such hybrid contents as gender, genetics, generation and genre adds a deeper form of structural intelligence to a tem-

poral and logical short-circuit that appears, in itself, as an interesting strategy for cross-breeding – actually, *bastardising* – scientific paradigms, literary traditions and cultural metaphors. Following in Sterne's footsteps, Eugenides entrusts the paradoxical tangle of Necessity and Arbitrariness, which is also the very marrow of the novel form as a "synthesis of the heterogeneous", precisely to an antediluvian theory that is theatrically artificial and erroneous inasmuch as it is exclusively founded on determinism. Which point needs to be properly emphasised in re-reading a novel that has probably been overpraised as to the relevance of its subject matter and its (fairly predictable) flamboyant stylistic traits, for it may shed further light on *Middlesex*'s genuine contribution to the literature/generation nexus and to the amphibious insight that the latter offers into the biology and evolution of literary models and deeper narrative structures.

The begetting of Calliope is thus the substantial knot – *the "buttonhole", in Sterne's vocabulary* – that, by waving together "The Silk Road" and "Ex Ovo Omnia", actually materialises the proclaimed "innate" circularity that is "in any genetic history" (M: 20). The story's circularity is in turn instantiated by the metafictional expedient of Preformation, i.e., a paradoxical metaphor of hybridisation in both human reproduction and literary perpetuation. In a novel focusing on subjective (and cultural) production and reproduction, and on textual (and sexual) creation and recreation, the *ab ovo* beginning and the anachronism of the *homunculus* do constitute a sound and credible 'middle' between Eugenides' themes and Sterne's morphologies – a genuinely hybrid reuse of *Tristram Shandy*'s model. (*Although not a single mention of Sterne is ever to be found in any of Eugenides' poetic declarations).* One might, at this point, go along with Eugenides' claim to never start a new novel "from a thematic point of view", such as the "reinvention of self, identity, or any of these things", but from a closer agglomeration of content and form, something like a "a germ where the rest of the book will grow from", a generative nucleus containing all the instructions for "plot, sense of character, sense of narrative voice and tone" (van Moorhem 2003). But how does *Middlesex* respond to these stimuli?

## 4. The novel's genome

The narrative structure of *Middlesex* seems, *alas*, to have been conceived by a preformist. Inspired by pastiche, it begins with "heroic epic narration", becoming "more realistic, more deeply psychological" as the generational plot unfolds, so that "like its hermaphroditic narrator" the structure appears as hybrid, "[p]art third-person epic, part first-person coming-of-age tale" (Foer 2002). With Milton and Tessie's birth, the epic family chronicle is contaminated with the social novel, and turns into coming-of-age autobiography with Calliope's childhood and adolescence. The principle of *ars combinatoria* is thus a common denominator between genetic transmission and literary perpetuation. "I wanted *Middlesex* to be [...] a kind of novelistic genome", Eugenides explains, clarifying that novel writing means, like procreating, cross-fertilising one's resources, putting them "into the blender [*sic*] and arrive at your own style and vision" (Foer 2002). As a consequence, the novel's metafictional structure reflects "the progression of Western literature, something in the way the 'Oxen of the Sun' chapter in *Ulysses* does" (Foer 2002), whereby the novelist's "hermaphroditic imagination" merges patterns and languages "in the same way we have ancient genes in our body combining in a different way to create different human beings" (Weich 2006).

But what precisely is hybridisation in a novel? According to Mikhail Bakhtin's classical definition, it is a deliberate "mixture of two social languages within the limits of a single utterance", or the "encounter, within the arena of an utterance, between two different linguistic consciousnesses, separated from one another by an epoch, by social differentiation or by some other factor" (1934-35: 358). This is whence the novel's heteroglossia originates, along with the novel's cultural significance as an aesthetic object that is both markedly distinct from the common 'prose of the world' and, by constitution, always entangled with the unfolding of social discourse around it. It is through a fecund contamination of "speech diversity and even language diversity" that the writer may construct "his style, while at the same time [maintaining] the unity of his own creative personality and the unity (although it is, to be sure, *unity of another order*) of his own style" (278, 298).[18] But in *Middlesex*'s case, one may argue, there may be a problem with

the very concept of "unity of another order". Indeed, Eugenides seems to identify hybridisation not with the somewhat viscous, strained, diagonal (and probably imperfect) articulation of multiplicity in oneness, but with the smooth, fragmentary, linear, cumulative (and easily polished) automatism of multiplicity as indefinite addition. To be clearer, *Middlesex*'s plurality is a horizontal arrangement of models that, in producing a constant deferral of narrative meanings, seems to be designed for a kaleidoscopic, fairly epidermic self-celebration of the novel form as a rhizome of differences. One has the impression of a self-congratulatory 'portrait of the novel as a hybrid genre' aspiring to embrace the Western tradition in all (or almost all) its manifestations, from classical antiquity (Homer, Ovid, Virgil) to European modernity (Fielding, Sterne, George Eliot, T.S. Eliot, James Joyce, Günther Grass) and twentieth-century United States (e.g. Vladimir Nabokov, Saul Bellow, J. D. Salinger, Philip Roth), South America (e.g. Gabriel García Márquez), Russia and India (Lev Tolstoj, Salman Rushdie), etc.

A mosaic, or palimpsest, of heterogeneous segments thus pushes the Stephanides' genealogical evolution forward, from 1922 Anatolia to 1930-60s Midwest, mid-1970s California and early-2000s Berlin. The genealogical plot proceeds in concert with the historiographical advancement of models and patterns that, ever since the rise of the genre, have gradually joined the – in itself quite spurious – novel's family tree. (*Time's arrow following in both cases a straight and cumulative vector).* Thus, pseudo-Homeric prose introduces Desdemona and Lefty, while the eighteenth-century novel of the origins, based on the individual's perilous search of a worldly destiny and social role, accompanies their flight to America in (roughly) the rest of Book One (M: 19-78). The "most realistic" model mentioned by Eugenides (Foer 2002), recalling the nineteenth-century industrial novel – think of Dickens' *Hard Times*, Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times* or Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* – accounts for Desdemona and Lefty's settling down in Detroit (M: 79-165). There follows a section, heterogeneously inspired by jazz improvisation ("Clarinet Serenade") and the 1950s short story, devoted to Milton's courtship of Tessie, and by the military dispatch and newsreel following Milton's military commitment in WWII (M: 166-214).

Finally, the Bildungsroman, the "more deeply psychological" section (Foer 2002), extends from Calliope's birth in Book Three to the end of the novel, including all coming-of-age stages, from Calliope's childhood, marked by the 1967 Detroit social riots, to the age of sociability, when her clan moves into the house called Middlesex, to her erotic apprenticeship with Clementine Stark, and her infatuation with "That Dark Object of Desire" (M: 319-400).[19] This last chapter speculates in particular on the cognitive and emotional distance between forty-year-old Cal and his former 'herself', copiously alternating the pronouns *I* and *she* – a technique alluding both to the rhetorical mask of unreliability (Booth 1961), and to the construction of point of view in film language.[20] Consistently with the matrix model, there follow the ordeal motif (Callie brought to an emergency room in Petoskey, doctors discovering her genital anomaly, a pilgrimage of medical inspections; M: 401-39), and ensuing *peripeteia*: events precipitate as Cal recognises 'himself' (and his fate) in front of the terms 'hermaphrodite' and 'monster' in *Webster's Dictionary*, and as he secretly reads his medical record at Dr Luce's "Sexual disorders and gender identity clinic" in New York (M: 430-39). Having his hair ritually cut, he embarks on a classical on-the-road exile trip to San Francisco ("Young Man, Go West"), where he will know exploitation (working as an erotic attraction in a night club) but also self-empowerment (upon hearing about 'gender' for the first time). Milton's death in a car crash finally calls him back home, where he will rediscover his roots and indulge the pleasures of elegy ("The Last Stop").

But, once again, are we really dealing with a hybrid novel? From the textual evidence gathered so far, it would appear that a full mixture of different literary gene pools – languages, genres and styles – is hardly accomplished. Not so much because a seamless narrative texture is replaced by the stitching together of heterogeneous narrative patches. Indeed, the structural significance of pastiche, as Sterne himself first taught, lies precisely in the conceptual exposition of a structural backbone mainly made not so much of parts themselves, but of the connections between them, i.e., hinges and joints, voids and fractures. But what is striking in this 'Harlequin patch-dress' structure is the relational poverty of its connections, whose function goes no further than being instrumental to an essentially linear narrative development.

There is, in other words, a depletion of systemic relationships that eventually ends up mortifying any attempt at "grasping" this kind of multiplicity "together" and transforming it "into a unified and complete story" (Mink 1978; Ricoeur 1984: 8). In truth, Eugenides' structural connections cannot be interpreted as mobile or conflictual thresholds; nor – to stick to the weaving metaphor – can one detect in them the nested tension of hems, brims or embroideries, or the ambiguous beauty of scars, for that matter, but only a cosmetic accumulation of 'pure' unaltered types that remain perfectly extractable from (*and therefore replaceable within*) the textual amalgam. (They are, in short, unnecessary types). The writing technique, one may speculate, may consist in the ex-post dismemberment of a preformed conventional narrative continuity (*possibly through the multiplication and addition of parts?*) into a plethora of units, which are then lined up again, one after another, and accessorily decorated with brims, voids and overlaps, much more than in the configuration (*through the division and articulation of a possible structural unity?*) of a system of connections in a substantially discontinuous, genuinely structurally hybrid "unity" (Bakhtin 1934-35: 298). Otherwise said, this narrative morphology does not appear, in its ultimate capacity, to be a form of structural intelligence. The deep logic of a knot, or the subterranean tension of a tangle, seems to be replaced by the surface pleasantness of a kaleidoscope. Morphology, in other words, does not qualify as a flexible, transformational process, but as a static and rigid, though aestheticized, procedure. And the outcome has probably more to do with cosmetic performativity than aesthetic excellence (a.k.a. 'genius').

As we know, narrative structures dialectically and simultaneously feed, on the one hand, on the *arbitrariness* of their kernels and connections (always partial, subjective, contingent and potentially different, in that entrusted to a specific act of selection and configuration) and, on the other, on the teleological determination of their configuration, that is to say, the overall *necessity* of *that* particular selection and *that* narrative arrangement with regards to *those* kernels and connections. To go back to the issue of the novel's bastardy, for instance, Fielding's creature, Tom Jones *must* be ignorant that he is actually not a bastard at all, i.e., that he is Mr Allworthy's legitimate nephew and heir, that condition being both the *sine qua* and the stakes of *that* particular plot, which would otherwise have no reason to build on a seductive dialogue between author and reader, etc. Fielding's reader *needs* to be kept in the dark as to the novel's secret, because that cognitive void is the keystone holding up the novel's architecture, and making the story meaningful.[21] In other words, there seems to be no reason why whatever happens just happens (*Arbitrariness*), except that it is a precise structural requirement (*Necessity*). There is therefore a paradoxical relationship between the parts and the whole of a story: it is a *hybrid* relationship of *mutual implication* that goes infinitely above and beyond the whole being the sum of parts. (*Even though the parts in question have been specifically designed for their aesthetic or programmatic value, as with* Middlesex). Paul Valéry condensed this fundamental law of configuration in a sentence like "The Marquise went out at five o' clock", in which a vertiginous sense of the arbitrary (*the Marquise? went out? at five?*) is one and the same thing with the inevitable patterning of a unified diegetic bond (*the Marquise-went out-at five*). Boris Tomaševskij and Gérard Genette labelled it as "motivation" or "retroactive determination", while Anton Chekhov's dramaturgy translated it into the 'Gun rule', prescribing that a gun hanging on a wall for *any* possible reason in the first act of a play must *necessarily* be used by the third, i.e., that every part of a whole must be either structurally necessary or expunged.

From this angle, the exuberance of Eugenides' paraphernalia reveals a morphological fallacy that should be read from within the scope of the novel's own metafictional awareness,[22] for the narrator her/himself refers to the structural relationship between Necessity and Arbitrariness as *the* fundamental law of narrative configuration. Interestingly, Calliope's "second birth" – the story's climax – occurs in a chapter titled "The Gun Hanging on the Wall": in an emergency room in Petoskey, the protagonist discovers he has a pair of hidden testicles in lieu of ovaries. Marking an *inevitable* turning point in the biological 'regime of truth' of Calliope's body, but also in the *arbitrary* selection of his new gender identity – for this discovery will change everything about Cal's self-perception and action initiative –, the chapter ends with this metafictional comment: "Chekhov was

right. If there's a gun on the wall, it's got to go off. [T]he way the doctor and nurse reacted made it clear that my body had lived up to the narrative requirements" (M: 396). There is a conceptual knot to untangle in these words: *a)* Calliope's disconcerting body obeys Chekhov's hybrid law; at the same time, *b)* the story in turn obeys the hybrid law of Calliope's body; and therefore, *c)* Calliope's body and story match one another within the structural law of hybridisation. But does this pseudo-syllogism actually prove that the cultural subject matter and morphological configuration of *Middlesex* – or, if you please, gender and genre, genetics and literature, nature and nurture, the parts and the whole of a narrative structure – are part of a unified, recognisable structural intelligence?

It seems to me that this well-begotten novel – possibly a preformist's vision of the best possible sum of the best possible parts –, the principles of Arbitrariness and Necessity do not alter (or temper, or transform) each other, neither at the morphological level of narrative structure, nor at the thematic level of gender identity. There is, on the contrary, a sensational but ultimately non-binding, evanescent fluctuation between absolute arbitrariness and absolute necessity. There is no tension, no paradox: there is no 'middle', in *Middlesex*. To clarify this last point, let us think back to some key episodes in the story. Why necessarily postulate an ex-nihilo case of sexual inversion, an *anima virili in corpore muliebri inclusa*, when young Callie shows her liking of the *Iliad* at school? Why explain her juvenile passion for the Dark Object as the secret effect of testosterone? Aren't these attributions of identity forms of unjustified necessity, or, conversely, of unconditional arbitrariness? Why should the representation of intersex identity radically exclude the possibility of homoerotic or homosexual practices? (*Indeed, Calliope's intimate manoeuvres with the Object do not actually seem to lack any male sexual attributes).* Also, thinking back to why and how Cal's transformation takes place, well may the narrator say that it was desire that made him "cross over to the other side, desire and the facticity of my body" (M: 479). But how exactly does Eugenides depict this momentous erotic-cum-somatic mixture? By a quick cut-and-paste of the following scenes: *i)* Calliope leaving for the New York clinic with "lip gloss and perfume" in her toiletry case, because she "wasn't certain that they were obsolete" (M: 404); *ii)* Calliope strongly objecting to Dr Luce's oversimplifying interpretation of the female outfit he is wearing as a refusal of his real male biological condition (M: 408); *iii)* Calliope secretly reading Dr Luce's medical record, stating that "the subject manifests a feminine gender identity and role, despite a contrary chromosomal state", and that "rearing, rather than genetic determinants, plays a greater role in the establishment of gender identity" (M: 437), and determining to run away as a boy. (*Right then and there, as a direct and immediate consequence of the discovery).* As he explains in a letter to his parents, "I am not a girl. I'm a boy". But more than this: later on, towards the end of the novel, he declares that "[t]his is the way I [always] was" (M: 439, 520). It is unclear how this essentialist epiphany could merge with the constructionist vision of gender identity that really is the novel's main thematic and cultural claim. Of course, one might resort to some 'reparative critical thinking', and hypothesise a politically incorrect or ambiguous revenge of biological corporeality (i.e., Cal) over the constructions and constrictions of culture (i.e., Callie).

All in all, while there is no denying how stimulating the genital-genetic-generational semantic association is, it is frankly hard to imagine Calliope as a "stereoscopic" fusion of two genders and as many different visions of the world (M: 269), and even less agreeable it would be to read *Middlesex* as a convincingly fecund hybridisation of genetics and culture, gender and genre, or as a prolific instantiation of the literature/generation nexus.

## 5. A *you*-genic hypothesis

An ambitious self-portrait of the novel within the Western cultural ecosystem of nearly the last three centuries, *Middlesex* appears, in both its merits and shortcomings, as an exemplary case for scrutinising the embrications of literature and generation. It showcases how powerful the innate sociocultural tensions of the novel as a genre actually, as well as how delicate, hard to mix and even harder to calibrate the structural folds and creases of narrative morphology can be. Most importantly, it demonstrates how synchronically generous and intrinsically 'bastard', with respect to all these stimuli, the novel is. Despite its contentment with merely walking on the surface of those tensions, and cosmetically camou-

flaging the depth of those creases, Eugenides' work shows how equipped (and indeed eager) the novel form is, and has always been, to gain the sympathy of the reader, i.e., that hungry, hard-to-please *you* that – as Fielding persuasively showed in 1749 - it is the job of writers to surprise and bland, and whose metafictional acumen has to be deliciously enticed through cunning references to (*Sterne's, actually*) metafictional intelligence.

Interestingly, one of the secret Sternean references employed by Eugenides concerns the humorous determinism of people's names: by a circumstantial fatality, the last of the Shandys is baptised Tristram instead of Trismegistus, and from this name's (imaginary) wretchedness, Tristram's father claims, an inevitable wave of bad luck shall – *ridiculously enough* – be cast upon the baby. This is how, for the first time ever in a novel, we are faced with the humorous, paradoxical, encounter between Arbitrariness and Necessity. Now, on the basis of a (*calculated?*) coincidence, the opposite fate seems to await Mr *Eu*genides, Smyrna merchant and Detroit-based writer: a bright future in the novel's family tree, one that is already pre-encapsulated in the auspicious Greek morphology of the author's very name: *Eu-genides, the 'well-begotten'*. But is this really the case? The answer cannot but, once again, lie 'in the middle'. On the one hand, how could one possibly deny the much-applauded *You*-genides, the 2003 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, critical consecration as one of the most successful protagonists of today's novel form? But on the other hand, how can one not notice that *Middlesex*, like the eponymous Detroit residence, is probably "better in theory than reality" (M: 258)?

The categories of Arbitrariness and Necessity thus, once again, and not for the last time, cross each other. For it would be equally impossible not to recognise, in this reading of Eugenides' novel, i.e., in the theoretical and aesthetic coordinates that this paper both deploys and is cognitively framed by, the very same combination of critical idiosyncrasy and hermeneutic determinism. And yet, it is in conversation with a frame such as the "literature/generation nexus" that *Middlesex* can reveal, along with its imperfections, its greatest value. Despite the critical aversion it may have generated twenty years ago through its implied rhetoric of irreverent literary genius – a 'genius' that was in truth and nearly in full borrowed from the eighteenth-century tradition – Eugenides' novel appears today as deserving to be reappraised. For precisely in responding in a rather imperfect way, the novel resonates a critical issue of considerable urgency, especially in today's growingly cosmetic and fundamentally de-textualised culture: *is there such a thing as a 'genetic make-up' of literature?* Can something like a DNA of literature preserve and reproduce (*in ovo, perhaps?*) the chromosomal heritage of 'good' writing, in terms of both literature's formal qualities and the cultural conditions of its creation? Can a 'middle ground' be imagined between the resources of human imagination, the infinity of their possible combinations and the selection of the successful (i.e., *necessary*) ones? Is it perhaps through such a *eu*genic hypothesis – and not only in reason of the arbitrary taste shown, generation after generation, by the cultural marketplace – that the happy or *medio*cre conception of literary texts may be evaluated?

## Notes

* An earlier, partial version of this paper appeared in Italian in *Ácoma. Rivista internazionale di studi nordamericani*.

[1] Born 1960 in Detroit to a father of Greek origin and an Anglo-Irish mother, Eugenides was also based in Berlin at the time of the novel's writing; Calliope is a "pseudo-male hermaphrodite", with a male chromosomal identity, but an ambiguous conformation of the external genitalia that is the result of "5-alpha-reductase deficiency syndrome", a mutation produced by a recessive gene in the fifth chromosome, triggered in turn by his ancestors' endogamy.

[2] Possible sources including, respectively, Gore Vidal's *Myra Breckinridge* and *Myron* (1969 and 1974); Brigid Brophy's *In Transit* (1969); Angela Carter's *The Passion of the New Eve* (1977); Chris Bohjalan's *Trans-Sister Radio* (2000); and Christine/George Jorgensen, *A Personal Autobiography* (1967), and John Colapinto's *As Nature Made Him: The Boy Who Was Raised as a Girl* (2000).

[3] See Foer 2002.

[4] Just before discovering his anomaly, Calliope plays Tiresias in a school staging of Sophocles' *Antigone*.

[5] This is also the title of the novel's opening chapter.

[6] Young Calliope is in fact prompted by sexologist Dr. Luce to write her own biographical and psychological profile, to complete her medical record. That is how, in intradiegetic fiction, *Middlesex* was conceived.

[7] The first-person-plural narrator of *The Virgin Suicides* (1993) was the collective remembering (and making sense of) five sisters' inexplicable suicide in the suburbs of Detroit.

[8] The clock motif, which in *Tom Jones* identifies the dazzling precision of the narrative mechanism, is used in *Tristram Shandy* in parodistic terms. Sterne's novel begins with a *coitus interruptus*, due to a mental association between the accomplishment of Mr and Mrs Shandy's conjugal duties and the monthly charge of the clock in the living room. An association that, recklessly pronounced aloud by Mrs Shandy, disrupts her husband's concentration, thus bringing about, according to the narrator and protagonist, a number of problems to come.

[9] According to Pete, spermatozoa containing 'female' genes are slower than 'male' ones in reaching the egg cell; to conceive a female baby, the sexual act should take place a few hours before ovulation, thus giving 'female' spermatozoa time to get to their destination at the right time. Hence the need to measure Tessie's body temperature with maximum precision. This is an odd idea, but it is also interesting in relation to Preformism and *Tristram Shandy*, as we shall see.

[10] Examples of metafictional comments include the following: "Freeze the action" (M: 109); "It's a long stairway, three flights up, and Sister Wanda has bad knees, so it will take some time for them to reach the top. Leave them there, climbing, while I explain what my grandmother had gotten herself into" (146). Calliope's birth is introduced with these words: "From here on in, everything I'll tell you is colored by the subjective experience of being part of events" (217).

[11] Here is an example of Fielding's dialogues with the reader: "Reader, take care, I have unadvisedly led thee to the top of as high a hill as Mr Allworthy's, and how to get thee down without breaking thy neck, I do not well know. However, let us e'en venture to slide down together" (Fielding 1749: 59).

[12] Here is another metanarrative mirroring between intra- and extradiegetic reality: "Middlesex! Did anybody ever live in a house as strange? As sci-fi? [...] Plate glass windows ran along the front. [...] Hudson Clark hadn't believed in doors. The concept of the door, of this thing that swung one way or the other, was outmoded. So in Middlesex we didn't have doors" (M: 258).

[13] Which is, as we shall see, the same mechanism used by Quentin Tarantino for killing and resuscitating John Travolta's character in *Pulp Fiction* (1994).

[14] This is how *Tom Jones* begins: "In that part of the western division of this kingdom, which is commonly called Somersetshire, there lately lived (and perhaps lives still) a gentleman whose name was Allworthy, and who might well be called the favourite of both Nature and Fortune" (Fielding 1749: 53).

[15] To produce a new human being, a male would therefore transfer spermatozoa, and with them the already formed *homunculus*, in the female womb, which during gestation would enable the foetus's predetermined growth.

[16] At the beginning of *Tristram Shandy*, Sterne inserts a dissertation by belligerent doctors of the Sorbonne on the question of prenatal baptism: is it appropriate or not to baptise the *homunculus* in its mother's womb, before its existence is put in jeopardy by childbirth? Sterne's advice would be to baptise, once and for all, the father's reproductive organ, and with it the progeny to come.

[17] "It all started when Jan Swammerdam used a scalpel to peel away the outer layers of a certain insect. What kind? Well... a member of the phylum Arthropoda. Latin name? Okay, then: *Bombyx mori*. The insect Swammerdam used in his experiments back in 1669 was nothing other than a silkworm. [...] The theory of Preformation was born. In the same way, I like to imagine my brother and me, floating together since the world's beginning on our raft of eggs", etc. (M: 199).

[18] My Italics.

[19] These episodes are played along the lines of *Lolita* and *The Catcher in the Rye*. Indeed, Salinger is mentioned as a literary influence of fourteen-year-old Callie, who is writing her memoirs at Dr Luce's request (M: 418).

[20] The section also contains a dramatic fragment, a school production of Sofocles' *Antigone*, in which Calliope plays Tiresias (M: 331).

[21] Another example: the character played by John Travolta in Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction* (1994) – the subtitle of which is "Three Stories about One Story" – *cannot but* die in the film's central episode, because this is required by the film's tripartite structure – because *that* one arbitrary disruption of the story's temporal order replaces the film's *'natural'* (i.e., chronologically linear) ending (Vincent Vega's shooting), with a specific *narrative* ending, which in its being clearly 'artificial' (i.e., morphologically relevant) is – structurally speaking – *the necessary ending*, i.e., Vincent Vega and Jules Winnfield thwarting a prank robbery in a cafeteria and dancing their way out to The Lonely Ones' *Surf Rider*. The viewer knows perfectly well that Vincent Vega will die in a few hours, and accepts it insofar as this death does not come as the film's narrative ending (as this would spoil the plot's morphology as well as gangster/picaresque mood).

[22] As well as from the point of view of the recent evolution and canonisation of the novel in the United States. On the one hand, a relevant

strand of contemporary US fiction, the one in which Eugenides was also inscribed with *Middlesex*, tends to a more and more complex interaction – therefore also including a whole range of contradictions and paradoxes – between formidable epistemological concerns and refined structural paradigms. Think, to mention only a few names, of Don DeLillo, Paul Auster, Joseph McElroy, William Gaddis, David Foster Wallace or Jonathan Franzen.

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