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(In)Sincere Authorship – Three Novels of Jeffrey Eugenides

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Vedoucí diplomové práce
(supervisor):
Mgr. David Vichnar, Ph.D.

Zpracovala (author):
Bc. Daniela Rydlová

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Prohlašuji, že jsem tuto diplomovou práci vypracovala samostatně, že jsem řádně citovala všechny použité prameny a literaturu a že práce nebyla využita v rámci jiného vysokoškolského studia či k získání jiného nebo stejného titulu.

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Daniela Rydlová

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I have no objections to the MA thesis being borrowed and used for study purposes.

Abstrakt

Pokud bychom chtěli charakterizovat „Novou upřímnost“, jde především o „hnutí“, které se vyznačuje tím, že reaguje na postmoderní ironii. Neznamená to však, že se chce postmoderní ironie vzdát. Spíše ji chce demaskovat, zkritizovat, využít a přesáhnout ji. Jeffrey Eugenides je autor, který má s „Novou upřímností“ mnoho společného, především to, jak nakládá s odkazem postmodernismu. Jeho romány balancují na pomezí postmoderních technik a zároveň je kritizují. Eugenides též píše o literární americké tradici a o problémech, které pronásledují současnou americkou společnost (genderová identita, duševní zdraví, americký sen, migrace apod.). Manifest „Nové upřímnosti“ Davida Fostera Wallace, text „E Unibus Pluram“, je na jednu stranu esejí o literární fikci, na druhou stranu je to ale také text o americké (nejen) televizní kultuře. Knihy Jeffreyho Eugenidese se však z velké části vyhýbají jakémukoliv komentáři k populární kultuře, a sociálněpolitický komentář je v nich často nedostatečný. Například odkaz reaganismu v letech, kdy americký prezidentský úřad zastávali prezidenti Bush a Clinton, je v knihách zachycen jen v lehkých náznacích, stejně tak jako další problémy, které charakterizovaly osmdesátá a devadesátá léta 20. století: šíření HIV a AIDS, všudypřítomná televizní kultura a její pozdější nahrazení digitální érou, informační zahlcení a vynořující se válka proti terorismu. Zároveň romány Jeffreyho Eugenidese jen zřídka odkazují na populární hudbu, televizní pořady či politiku, ačkoli jsou napsány v devadesátých letech 20. století a na počátku 21. století. Eugenides se místo populárních referencí uchyluje k nepřetržitým odkazům na klasičtější literární kánon. Tato práce tedy k dílu Jeffreyho Eugenidese přistupuje v kontextu „Nové upřímnosti“ a považuje jeho práce za jakýsi post-postmoderní návrat k modernismu. Ačkoliv k modernismu, který už se musí vypořádávat s postmoderní ironií a její všudypřítomností v americké kultuře. Upřímnost v jeho románech je mnohem konzervativnější než ta, kterou najdeme u jeho literárních kolegů. I přesto je taková upřímnost charakterizována stejným étosem. Tato práce nejprve vymezuje klíčové charakteristiky autorů, kteří se volně řadí k „Nové upřímnosti“. Zajímá se především o to, jaké jsou rozdíly mezi autentičností a upřímností, a zkoumá, jaké požadavky má mít literární prostor, který o takovou upřímnost usiluje, s pomocí filozofie dialogu a intersubjektivitu. Dále pak tato práce analyzuje tři romány Jeffreyho Eugenidese – *The Marriage Plot* (2011, česky *Hra o manželství*, 2012), *The Virgin Suicides* (1993, česky vyšlo jako *Sebevraždy panen* v roce 2013), a *Middlesex* (2002, česky *Hermafrodit*, 2009). Jejich analýza se zaměřuje především na to, jak dané romány přepracovávají odkaz postmodernismu a jak pracují s tématy literární tradice, nostalgie a hybridity. *Sebevraždy Panen* jsou například voyeurským podobenstvím televizní kultury, které se odehrává v sedmdesátých letech 20. století na předměstí Detroitu. *Hermafrodit* je epickým románem zabývajícím se genderem a *Hra o manželství* představuje variaci na modernistický Bildungsroman, jehož nejzajímavějšími prvky jsou zájem o akademické psaní a prostředí, již zmiňovaný postmodernismus a také texty Davida Fostera Wallace.

Klíčová slova: „Nová Upřímnost“, Jeffrey Eugenides, Modernismus, Postmodernismus, Post-postmodernismus, Upřímnost, Autentičnost, Realismus, Populární kultura, Konzervatismus, Americká kultura, Literární fikce, Metafikce

Abstract

Above anything else, New Sincerity is characterized by responding to postmodern irony, not in the form of its abandonment, but rather in its unmasking, critique, redeployment and transcendence. What Jeffrey Eugenides shares with New Sincerity authors is a critical treatment of the heritage of postmodernism. Balancing between postmodernist techniques and their transcendence, Eugenides writes about contemporary issues plaguing the American society (gender identity, mental health, the American dream, migration) and addresses the literary tradition of American fiction. However, his response to the literary tradition of postmodernism differs from the majority of New Sincerity writers. The New Sincerity's "manifesto," David Foster Wallace's "E Unibus Pluram," is an essay about fiction, but it is also a text about American television and culture. Eugenides' books by and large avoid commentary on popular culture, and their socio-political commentary is often found inadequate: their reflection of the legacy of Reaganomics within the Bush and Clinton administrations is oblique, as is their treatment of the many other issues symptomatic of the 1980s and 1990s: the spread of HIV/AIDS, the ubiquitous television culture and its gradual replacement in the digital age, information oversaturation and the looming war on terrorism. Although written in the 1990s and early 2000s, these novels hardly ever reference popular music or television shows or politics. Instead, Eugenides' books make sustained references to the canon. This thesis approaches the work of Jeffrey Eugenides in the context of New Sincerity by treating his work as a post-postmodernist return to modernism, even though a modernism that needs to deal with the heritage of postmodern irony. Eugenides' sincerity is perhaps more conservative than that of his colleagues, but governed by a similar ethos. This thesis at first delineates the key characteristics of New Sincerity authors. It deals especially with the differences between authenticity and sincerity, and with delineating the space in which such sincerity can thrive, referring to the philosophy of dialogue and intersubjectivity. Three novels by Eugenides — *The Marriage Plot* (2011), *The Virgin Suicides* (1993), and *Middlesex* (2002) — are analysed from the perspective of their reworking of the postmodernist heritage, while concentrating on the themes of the literary tradition, nostalgia and hybridity. For instance, *The Virgin Suicides* is a voyeuristic parable of television watching set in Detroit suburbs in the 1970s, *Middlesex* is an epic "gender novel" oddity and *The Marriage Plot* is a variation on the modernist Bildungsroman examined from the perspective of thesis writing, academic postmodernism and also the texts of David Foster Wallace.

Key words: New Sincerity, Jeffrey Eugenides, Modernism, Postmodernism, Post-postmodernism, Sincerity, Authenticity, Realism, Pop culture, Conservatism, American culture, Fiction writing, Metafiction

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Introduction: What is New Sincerity? And How Does Jeffrey Eugenides (not) Fit in?

Sincerity and postmodern irony

Paradoxes, fully embraced rather than disowned, are at the core of what we call “New Sincerity.” Authors most often connected to this “movement” include David Foster Wallace, Jonathan Franzen, Dave Eggers, George Saunders, Junot Díaz, Jennifer Egan, Rick Moody and Rachel Kushner. Jeffrey Eugenides is not mentioned in the core texts on New Sincerity, but his novels are often discussed in connection with them, for instance in Ryan M. Brooks’ essay on post-postmodernism and neoliberalism,¹ or in Lee Konstantinou’s texts on the postironic Bildungsroman.² The question of whether Jeffrey Eugenides is a New Sincerity writer is complicated by the fact that if we were to look for an exhaustive definition of what New Sincerity is, we would inevitably fail. New Sincerity is a loose movement of paradoxes of which its authors are generally aware; and it is the authors themselves who often sabotage their own ideas and point out problems inherent to this “movement.” What we can do instead of introducing a precise definition is to present a few ideas these authors share.

The common denominator is their response to postmodernism and postmodern irony, not in the form of their abandonment, but rather in their unmasking and transcendence. Especially postmodern irony is simply part of the (literary) world and to deal with this heritage, it must be embraced and discarded at the same time. Martin Paul Eve in “Sincerity” formulates this approach as “a calculated reactionary response against a perceived fraudulence paradox within a specific style of mid-late twentieth-century writing: ironic postmodern metafiction.”³ What is meant by fraudulence paradox is exemplified by one passage from David Foster Wallace’s “Good, Old Neon”:

The fraudulence paradox was that the more time and effort you put into trying to appear impressive or attractive to other people, the less impressive or attractive you felt inside – you were a fraud. And the more of a fraud you

¹ Ryan M. Brooks, “‘The Family Gone Wrong’: Post-Postmodernism, Neoliberalism, and the Contemporary Novel’s Contract with the Reader,” *49th Parallel* 39 (2017): 22-45.

² Lee Konstantinou, “Four Faces of Postirony,” in *Metamodernism*, eds. Robin van den Akker, Alison Gibbons and Timotheus Vermeulen (London, New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2017), 87-102.

³ Martin Paul Eve, “Sincerity,” in *The Routledge Companion to Twenty-First Century Literary Fiction*, eds. Daniel O’Gorman and Robert Eaglestone (New York: Routledge, 2019), 36.

felt like, the harder you tried to convey an impressive or likable image of yourself so that other people wouldn't find out what a hollow, fraudulent person you really were.⁴

If this is a paradox specific to postmodern metafiction, then what postmodernity started was perfected in the contemporary social media landscape. Dave Eggers reacts to the hunt for likes and likeability in his 2013 novel *The Circle* where people are excluded from society when they do not wish to participate in the "Sharing is caring. Privacy is theft. Secrets are lies"⁵ experiment. It is one of the symptoms of the modern society to obsess over appearance, and it is something especially important for fiction writers, not so much to obsess over appearances of others, but of the way they appear to their readers. The attempt to be liked, attractive and impressive but in a genuine and not fraudulent way is at the heart of many New Sincerity texts, and especially those of David Foster Wallace.

Eve explains that it is not a simple turn from fraudulence to sincerity that defines New Sincerity but there is always a co-existence of irony and sincerity.⁶ Iain Williams in "(New) Sincerity in David Foster Wallace's 'Octet'" ponders the idea that there is something inherently ambiguous about Wallace's sincerity, admitting that Wallace in some places seems sincere about his agenda and in other places the reader is not sure whether this all is not just an artistic joke: "one can never finally shake the feeling that it is all part of an elaborate joke, an infinite jest"⁷. Inevitably, New Sincerity texts call for being judged based on their sincerity or insincerity.

In order to discuss whether New Sincerity is or is not sincere, an explanation of what is meant by "sincerity" is required. Martin Paul Eve understands sincerity as "a type of honesty that is not merely concerned with an accuracy in one's statements to others but is rather based on checking future actions against previous speech and behaviour."⁸ To be sincere, one must prove their sincerity by actions. However, because this is a time-consuming process reaching into the future, Eve adds that sincerity is based on trust. "Sincerity is an

⁴ David Foster Wallace, "Good Old Neon," in *Oblivion* (New York and Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 2004), 147.

⁵ Dave Eggers, *The Circle* (New York: Random House LLC, 2014), 305.

⁶ Eve, "Sincerity," 36.

⁷ Iain Williams, "(New) Sincerity in David Foster Wallace's 'Octet,'" *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 56, no. 3 (2015): 302, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00111619.2014.899199>.

⁸ Eve, "Sincerity," 37.

ongoing negotiation between trust, public performance and proof, between the rhetoric of the present and the action of the future.”⁹ Already, it can be seen that this negotiation is problematic because of the nature of fiction. At first, what future actions and statements are to be checked? And secondly, in fiction one can both record and invent. How is it possible to check and prove the text’s sincerity in the manufactured construct that is every literary text?

In his “David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction,” Adam Kelly, the main figure in New Sincerity criticism, writes about a two-way conversation between the author and the reader which is characteristic of New Sincerity:

In Wallace’s terms, the greatest terror, but also the only true relief, is the passive decision to relinquish the self to the judgment of the other, and the fiction of the New Sincerity is thus structured and informed by this dialogic appeal to the reader’s attestation and judgment.¹⁰

The reader then becomes the central figure to judge the text’s sincerity. Kelly’s stance on sincerity and insincerity is as follows: “I would suggest, being a ‘post-postmodernist’ of Wallace’s generation means never quite being sure whether you are one, whether you have really managed to escape narcissism, solipsism, irony and insincerity.” The ethical obligation to decide whether the author is sincere or insincere falls on the reader. Sincerity is therefore an unfinished project, an ongoing dialogue between the author and the reader.

Sincerity, authenticity and intersubjectivity

The importance of the reader is also evident in the differentiation between the terms “sincerity” and “authenticity.” According to Eve, authenticity is a private concept only understood by an individual, but sincerity is a social concept where an individual is judged by others.¹¹ From this definition, sincerity is always an outward-reaching attribute of the individual and in this case of the author. Similarly, to demonstrate the difference, Kelly adopts Lionel Trilling’s definition of sincerity and authenticity and writes that:

⁹ Eve, “Sincerity,” 38.

¹⁰ Adam Kelly, “David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction,” in *Consider David Foster Wallace: Critical essays*, ed. David Hering (Los Angeles, Austin: Sideshow Media Group Press, 2010), 145.

¹¹ Eve, “Sincerity,” 38.

Whereas sincerity places emphasis on intersubjective truth and communication with others, and on what Trilling calls the ‘public end in view’, authenticity conceives truth as something inward, personal and hidden, the goal primarily of self-expression rather than other-directed communication.¹²

Sincerity in fiction is an intersubjective process in which the author-reader relationship is the prominent feature. In order to understand this intersubjectivity a little better, we can use three concepts from the philosophy of dialogue and intersubjectivity: Martin Buber’s “Unmittelbarkeit”, Gabriel Marcel’s “availability,” and Emanuel Levinas’s understanding of “the face.” Buber writes about “Unmittelbarkeit,” the unmediated relation which plays a big role in dialectic ontology, the following:

The relation to the *Thou* is direct. No system of ideas, no foreknowledge, and no fancy intervene between *I* and *Thou*. The memory itself is transformed, as it plunges out of its isolation into the unity of the whole. No aim, no lust, and no anticipation intervene between *I* and *Thou*. Desire itself is transformed as it plunges out of its dream into the appearance. Every means is an obstacle. Only when every means has collapsed does the meeting come about.¹³

Gabriel Marcel also writes about the dialogue between two subjects and attempts to explain how we can truly communicate with one another. How to be present for other subjects? Marcel has this to say:

The notion of availability is no less important for our subject than that of presence, with which it is bound up. It is an undeniable fact, though it is hard to describe in intelligible terms, that there are some people who reveal themselves as "present" – that is to say, at our disposal – when we are in pain or in need to confide in someone, while there are other people who do not give us this feeling, however great is their goodwill. It should be noted at once that the distinction between presence and absence is not at all the same as that between attention and distraction. The most attentive and the most conscientious listener may give me the impression of not being present; he gives me nothing, he cannot make room for me in himself, whatever the material favours which he is prepared to grant me.¹⁴

The goal is to create space for communication. In the case of New Sincerity it is to create space in which the text can be present, to be at disposal of other, the space

¹² Kelly, “David Foster Wallace,” 132.

¹³ Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Ronald Gregor Smith (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1937), 11-12.

¹⁴ Gabriel Marcel, *The Philosophy of Existentialism* (New York: Citadel Press, 1970), 39-40.

in which the reader and the author are present for each other. The text becomes not an objective artifact but an intersubjective process. On the other hand, there is the space of unavailability which is undesired:

Pessimism is rooted in the same soil as the inability to beat the disposal of others. If the latter grows in us as we grow old, it is only too often because, as we draw near to what we regard as the term of our life, anxiety grows in us almost to the point of choking us; to protect itself, it sets up an increasingly heavy, exacting and, I would add, vulnerable mechanism of self-defence.¹⁵

The vulnerable mechanism of self-defence is very close to New Sincerity's attitude to postmodern irony. The problem with irony is that it is possible to ironically joke about things that are not funny. Not many people can stop laughing and realize that there is something irrevocably sad about things that people joke about. David Foster Wallace writes in "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction" that "even gifted ironists work best in sound bites. I find them sort of wickedly fun to listen to at parties, but I always walk away feeling like I've had several radical surgical procedures."¹⁶ Irony serves as a coping mechanism because the use of irony ensures that no one can reveal our weaknesses: "cynicism announces that one knows the score, was last naïve about something at maybe like age four."¹⁷ Irony and cynicism are very clearly defence mechanisms that create unavailability.

The third concept is connected to Levinas's criticism of insincerity as he writes about the face, shifting the egoistic centrality of ourselves to the Other:

The nakedness of his (the stranger's) face extends into the nakedness of the body that is cold and that is ashamed of its nakedness. [...] There is here a relation between me and the other beyond rhetoric. This gaze that supplicates and demands, that can supplicate only because it demands, deprived of everything because entitled to everything, and which one recognizes in giving (as one "puts the things in question in giving") – this gaze is precisely the epiphany of the face as a face. The nakedness of the face is destituteness. To recognize the Other is to recognize a hunger. To recognize the Other is to give.¹⁸

¹⁵ Marcel, *The Philosophy of Existentialism*, 43.

¹⁶ David Foster Wallace, "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction," *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 13, no. 2 (Summer 1993): 183.

¹⁷ Wallace, "E Unibus Pluram," 181.

¹⁸ Emanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 75.

The face is naked. It calls for responsibility and hospitality. The real freedom lies in recognizing the differences of the Other and freeing ourselves from egoistic freedom that is self-centred. Nakedness is found at the core of New Sincerity as evidenced in Wallace's short story "Octet" from *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*. Williams calls "Octet" an Ur-text of New Sincerity¹⁹ and it is this text to which critics usually turn if they want to lay the basis for this group of authors. The narrator of "Octet" states that in the author's relationship to the reader it is necessary to be completely sincere which also means being exposed to the reader. Such a sincere text is urgent. It is a call for understanding. It is wooing of the author and a request to be liked not in a spontaneous, but a very elaborate way. While incorporating metafiction and irony, it desists from overly explicatory, almost robot-like style but also from being too ambiguous. The connection with the reader is a sincere and artificial construct at the same time. The narrator of "Octet" also writes about the attempt to please, but in comparison with television, the author's writing process is a desperate endeavour:

Imagine you've gone to a party where you know very few of the people there, and then on your way home afterwards you suddenly realize that you just spent the whole party so concerned about whether the people there seemed to like you or not that you now have absolutely no idea whether you like any of *them* or not.²⁰

It is an endeavour to break free from the fraudulent paradox.

Sincerity and alertness to life

In his commencement speech to Kenyon College commonly known as "This is Water," Wallace refers to a concept of alertness to life which exists without big narratives, dogmas, and if possible, without worshipping. In the speech Wallace gives priority to what is right in front of us and to what is often overlooked. It is "awareness of what is so real and essential, so hidden in plain sight all around us, all the time."²¹ Wallace focuses on everyday ordinary awareness and emphasizes that "the really important kind of freedom involves attention and awareness and discipline and being able truly to care about other people and to sacrifice for them

¹⁹ Williams, "(New) Sincerity," 300.

²⁰ David Foster Wallace, "Octet," in *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2009), Kindle.

²¹ David Foster Wallace, "This is Water – David Foster Wallace Commencement Speech," May 19, 2013, video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8CrOL-ydFMI>.

over and over in myriad petty unsexy ways. That is real freedom.”²² What is reminiscent of Levinas’s philosophy is the egoism of our own feelings. Wallace says: “Other people’s thoughts and feelings have to be communicated to you somehow, but your own are so immediate, urgent, real.”²³ The construction of reality is for Wallace a matter of personal, intentional choice. “It’s not important what is true, it is important that you get to decide how you’re gonna try to see it.”²⁴ The important thing is not to slip into the default setting of our self-centred thoughts but to try to understand the Other, the other’s face and what is behind it. “Choosing to do the work of somehow altering or getting free of my natural, hard-wired default setting which is to be deeply and literally self-centred.”²⁵ According to Wallace, the present culture of the world of wanting, achieving and displaying unfortunately supports being egoistic and self-centred, but it is possible to choose to think differently.

In comparison with the sentiment in “This is Water”, there are three key concepts for Eugenides vis-à-vis life: alertness to it, its recording, and preservation thereof in literature, concepts which must be kept while the novel is moving forward. “For me ‘doing justice’ to the world involves paying attention to its specificity, all the details that make up a place, a neighbourhood, a family, or a person.”²⁶ This is what appreciation of life should look like and that is how we should deal with life, its transience and also with the key realities of America. Both approaches speak of life before death, but what Eugenides refers to is closer to alertness to life written down in a grand narrative while paying attention to what is unique and singular. For Eugenides, being a writer seems almost a sacred mission. He said in one of his interviews what his mission as writers is. And like Stephen Dedalus, he wants to

form the “uncreated conscience of his race.” That's what I wanted to do, even though I didn't really know what it meant. I do remember thinking, however, that to be a writer was the best thing a person could be. It seemed

²² Wallace, “This is Water.”

²³ Wallace, “This is Water.”

²⁴ Wallace, “This is Water.”

²⁵ Wallace, “This is Water.”

²⁶ Jeffrey Eugenides, “An Interview with Jeffrey Eugenides,” interview by Jérémy Potier, *Transatlantica: Revue d'Études Américaines* 1 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.4000/transatlantica.155228>.

to promise maximum alertness to life. It seemed holy to me, and almost religious.²⁷

Alertness to life is what matters and to record a life is a mission because it is inevitably fading away. Jérémy Potier asks in his interview with the author: “Do you mean to imply that a sustained effort of attention can be a way to both disclose and safeguard what is usually so easily overlooked?”²⁸ To which Eugenides replies that not recording major events in life is the same as not living through them. At first, the source for Eugenides’ writings comes from the ancient fear: What will remain after you when you die? Coming back to the past, living in the memories and recording them is the way to deal with life. But the important thing is not the act of recording. In recording, the narrative is ordered, events interpreted and presented. Judith N. Shklar wrote in *Ordinary Vices* that: “Stories expose rather than create order, and in so doing they can render explicit much that is inarticulate.”²⁹ The actual ordering and reworking of history is a much more important concept for this American author.

Sincerity and television culture

Alertness to life and the return to sincerity can be understood as New Sincerity’s response to postmodernism and poststructuralism. Kelly writes that “for Wallace, any return to sincerity must be informed by a study of postmodernist fiction, in order to properly take into account the effects wrought by contemporary media, particularly TV and advertising.”³⁰ Eve points out a few characteristics of postmodernist literature to which New Sincerity authors react. These are irony, reflexivity, metafiction, reworkings of history, a playful mode teasing the reader, paranoia and non-linearity which are supposed to address the perceived failings of literary realism and are more suitable for representing the actual life.³¹ How this reactive attitude of New Sincerity works is explained by Iain Williams on the example of Wallace’s “Octet.” He writes that:

²⁷ Jeffrey Eugenides, “The Art of Fiction No. 215: Jeffrey Eugenides,” interview by James Gibbons, *Paris Review* 199 (Winter 2011): 127.

²⁸ Eugenides, interview by Jérémy Potier.

²⁹ Judith N. Shklar, *Ordinary Vices* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1984), 230.

³⁰ Kelly, “David Foster Wallace,” 134.

³¹ Eve, “Sincerity,” 39.

He (Wallace) has to accept the ubiquity of poststructuralist techniques and critical theory, not in order to refute them but in order to recognize them as constituents of our contemporary reality.³²

The main characteristics on which Williams focuses is irony. There are various approaches, on the part of New Sincerity authors, to irony; some aim towards synthesis of irony and sincerity, but as Williams writes, Wallace works within the framework of irony, acknowledging its existence. Williams explains that in “Octet” Wallace works not against irony but through the spectre of irony. The article also operates with the term “millennial zeitgeist.” The text does not specify just what exactly the millennial zeitgeist might be, but it revolves around the topics of irony and negativity connected to US culture. It refers mainly to Christy Wampole’s “famous” 2012 article “How to Live without Irony” where she states that

For many Americans born in the 1980s and 1990s — members of Generation Y, or Millennials — particularly middle-class Caucasians, irony is the primary mode with which daily life is dealt. One need only dwell in public space, virtual or concrete, to see how pervasive this phenomenon has become. Advertising, politics, fashion, television: almost every category of contemporary reality exhibits this will to irony.³³

New Sincerity authors accept the premise that irony is omnipresent, and they attempt to deal with this ubiquity. Kelly compares Wallace’s texts to those of Jacques Derrida’s and writes that “they both develop a writing that relentlessly interrogates its own commitments, and a logic that reflects back on itself to the greatest degree possible.”³⁴ This applies to irony as well.

In “E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction,” Wallace argues that “irony and ridicule are entertaining and effective, and [...] at the same time they are agents of a great despair and stasis in U.S. culture...”³⁵ He makes it clear that not only postmodernist fiction was a victim of irony. “The best TV of the last five years has been about ironic self-reference like no previous species of postmodern art could have dreamed of.”³⁶ American fiction has been influenced by television, and irony is an inherent part of television. It is necessary to mention that Wallace

³² Williams, “(New) Sincerity,” 301.

³³ Christy Wampole, “How to Live Without Irony,” *New York Times*, November 17, 2012, <https://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/11/17/how-to-live-without-irony/>.

³⁴ Kelly, “David Foster Wallace,” 138.

³⁵ Wallace, “E Unibus Pluram,” 171.

³⁶ Wallace, “E Unibus Pluram,” 159.

does not treat television as an evil entity that lowers people's IQ. However, it does not mean that it cannot be harmful and addictive. The watcher's attitude to television is embedded in a love-hate relationship.³⁷

According to Wallace, the general problem of television is its necessity to please the audience: "TV is not low because it is vulgar or prurient or stupid. It is often all these things, but this is a logical function of its need to please Audience."³⁸ The problem is what Wallace mentions at the beginning of the essay, that if we want to know what American normality is and what Americans want to regard as normal, we can trust TV. But not only is it an issue of television. Fiction is like television in many respects. If television is for lonely watchers, then fiction is for lonely readers. Both television and fiction are riddled with irony. It is the same voyeurism and ogling of characters that television is characterized by. To echo one of the interviews with Wallace:

If I have a real enemy, a patriarch for my patricide, it's probably Barth and Coover and Burroughs, even Nabokov and Pynchon. Because, even though their self-consciousness and irony and anarchism served valuable purposes, were indispensable for their times, their aesthetic absorption by U.S. commercial culture has had appalling consequences for writers and everyone else.³⁹

Wallace argues that where television and fiction converse and consort is self-conscious irony.⁴⁰ Television can make fun of itself, it can criticize itself and can congratulate the watcher if they see through its manufactured deception. There is no space for criticism, as television is capable of criticizing itself. Wallace asks:

How to rebel against TV's aesthetic of rebellion? How to snap readers awake to the fact that our TV culture has become a cynical, narcissistic, essentially empty phenomenon, when television regularly celebrates just these features in itself and its viewers?⁴¹

To surpass irony even though it is revered by television and is a part of everyday experience is the task for New Sincerity.

³⁷ Wallace, "E Unibus Pluram," 162.

³⁸ Wallace, "E Unibus Pluram," 162.

³⁹ David Foster Wallace, "An Expanded Interview with David Foster Wallace," interview by Larry McCaffery, in *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*, ed. Stephen J. Burn (Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), 52.

⁴⁰ Wallace, "E Unibus Pluram," 161.

⁴¹ Wallace, "E Unibus Pluram," 184.

Eugenides' novels do not deal with television directly, even though his first novel *The Virgin Suicides* centres on the community of watchers and oglers who are driven by the hunger for observing and explaining. But direct references to television and popular culture in general are non-existent. It is almost a reversion of what Wallace labels as "one of the most recognizable things about this century's postmodern fiction [...], the movement's strategic deployment of pop-cultural references – brand names, celebrities, television programs – in even its loftiest high-art projects."⁴² One of the possible, even though ineffective, routes available to contemporary fiction suggested by "E Unibus Pluram" is connected to fundamentalism. This can serve as a basis for connection between New Sincerity and Eugenides' texts. The approach is "to declare contemporary television evil and contemporary culture evil and turn one's back on the whole Spandexed mess and genuflect instead to good old pre-sixties Hugh Beaumontish virtues."⁴³

However, Wallace writes about a return to pre-sixties and Eugenides mentions a return further into the past. The general sentiment of all Eugenides' text can be summarized by this sentence: "Often, we have to retrace our path to find a way out of the thicket of the present."⁴⁴ He explains: "We were weaned on experimental writing before ever reading much of the nineteenth-century literature the modernists and postmodernists were reacting against. It was like studying art history by starting with Cubism before going to look at the Italian Renaissance."⁴⁵ In his words, it is an attempt "to reconcile (these) two poles of literature, the experimentalism of the modernists and the narrative drive and centrality of character of the nineteenth-century realists."⁴⁶ One must look back before looking forward.

But why is it important for this author to look back and why is the past so valuable? One explanation is that such a return is an opportunity for reworking the past. The second explanation is tied to the absence of pop-culture in Eugenides'

⁴² Wallace, "E Unibus Pluram," 166.

⁴³ Wallace, "E Unibus Pluram," 185.

⁴⁴ Eugenides, interview by J r my Potier.

⁴⁵ Jeffrey Eugenides, "Jeffrey Eugenides by Jonathan Safran Foer," interview by Jonathan Safran Foer, in *Bomb Magazine* 81(Fall 2002), <https://bombmagazine.org/articles/jeffrey-eugenides/>.

⁴⁶ Eugenides, interview by James Gibbons.

text. There is no “spectacle and gimmickry.”⁴⁷ Popular culture was not present in such an amount in society in the 19th century culture and literature, and more importantly it did not permeate all aspects of life. The pop-culture vacuum in which the novels take place is conspicuous. Even though Eugenides employs many modernist and postmodernist techniques, his novels show an attempt, at least culturally, to return before that. It could be also understood as a return to the logocentric understanding of the text, to “eternal truths,” and the world of binaries.

This turn back, this dedication to dealing with postmodernist heritage, these different approaches to alertness to life and the strategy and technique for creating availability in the text in order to create a sincere relationship between the author and the reader — the novels’ engagement with metafiction, ambiguity and over defining — should be analyzed if we are to determine whether Jeffrey Eugenides is part of the New Sincerity movement, or whether he is, as it seems, a by-product author of New Sincerity and a more conservative writer than the rest. The first novel discussed in chapter 1 is Eugenides’ latest, *The Marriage Plot* (2011), which directly deals with New Sincerity through the persona of David Foster Wallace.

⁴⁷ Jeffrey Eugenides, “Jeffrey Eugenides: ‘I’m not trying to compete with the outrageousness of Trump,’ interview by Hermione Hoby, *The Guardian*, November 25, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/nov/25/jeffrey-eugenides-interview>

Chapter 1 *The Marriage Plot*, Trends and the Tradition

1.1 Love after postmodernism

It may seem obsolete in literary criticism to discuss as ancient a theme as love. Love is a topic that belongs to a different and distant sphere, as if a love story is something that “serious” readers have already outgrown, so it cannot be taken seriously in the 21st century and in the world riddled with irony and everyday cynicism. And yet, love and literature are themes that are inseparable in Jeffrey Eugenides’ third novel *The Marriage Plot* (2011). The central text to which the main characters respond is Roland Barthes’s *A Lover’s Discourse* (1977) which acknowledges that:

The description of the lover’s discourse has been replaced by its simulation, and to that discourse has been restored its fundamental person, the *I*, in order to stage an utterance, not an analysis. What is proposed, then, is a portrait – but not a psychological portrait; instead, a structural one which offers the reader a discursive site: the site of someone speaking within himself, *amorously*, confronting the other (the loved object), who does not speak.¹

Restoration of the fundamental person, the egoistic *I*, in its relationship to the object is one of the concerns of the philosophy of dialogue and intersubjectivity discussed in the introductory chapter. The narrator of *The Marriage Plot* observes while attempting to re-establish a relationship with her boyfriend, hers “was a brilliant strategy because it lacked all strategy. It involved no games, only sincerity. Seeing such sincerity, how could Leonard fail to respond?”² There are parts in the novel which can refer to love and human relationships, but they also refer to literature. The previous quote from *The Marriage Plot* almost echoes the concerns of New Sincerity writers when it seeks to re-establish a sincere, and genuine, relationship between two people, the author and the reader. And to reconstruct such a relationship means to create that space of availability where no participant is in the centre. Thurston, the most vocal of Madeleine’s classmates, asks: “How do you write about something, even something real and painful — like suicide — when all of the writing that’s been done on that subject has robbed

¹ Roland Barthes, *A Lover’s Discourse*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Penguin Random House, 2018), 3.

² Jeffrey Eugenides, *The Marriage Plot* (London: Fourth Estate, 2012), 65.

you of any originality of expression?”³ The originality of expression is an important issue for Thurston but there are other concerns to be wary of. Jacques Derrida, who is often mentioned in *The Marriage Plot* as a source of disruption, writes about literature as “historical institution with its conventions, rules, etc., but also this institution of fiction which gives *in principle* the power to say everything, to break free of the rules, to displace them.”⁴ If literature has the power to say everything and anything then originality of expression is the least concern for the author-reader relationship.

1.2 Semiotics, deconstruction and misconceptions

Apart from love and relationships, the biggest concern for the *Marriage Plot* is the supposed literary tradition. Whereas trends can be seen as whimsical and insincere, the tradition is almost always perceived as more genuine. It is desirable to come back to the tradition. It represents security and comfort. Madeleine Hanna, Eugenides’ main character and an English student at Brown University in 1982 who became an English major “for the purest and dullest of reasons: because she loved to read,”⁵ seeks comfort in books that have been part of university curricula and literary canons for decades. Not only philosophy becomes the source of consolation, as Boethius suggested, but also literature can have the same effect, at least for Madeleine.

Reading a novel after reading semiotic theory was like jogging emptyhanded after jogging with hand weights. After getting out of Semiotics 211, Madeleine fled to the Rockefeller Library, down to B Level, where the stacks exuded a vivifying smell of mold, and grabbed something — anything, *The House of Mirth*, *Daniel Deronda* — to restore herself to sanity.⁶

Semiotics, to Madeleine, is a state of entropy which must be answered by reversion to sanity. It asks troubling questions. However, the problem with semiotics in *The Marriage Plot* is that it is often identified with the concept of deconstruction and with Derrida. More than the state of entropy caused by

³ Eugenides, *The Marriage Plot*, 28.

⁴ Jacques Derrida, “This Strange Institution Called Literature,” interview by Derek Attridge, *Acts of Literature* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 37.

⁵ Eugenides, *The Marriage Plot*, 20.

⁶ Eugenides, *The Marriage Plot*, 47.

semiotics, Madeleine's insanity is caused by the seminar dealing with semiotics but also with a variety of authors coming after semiotics. What Madeleine struggles with is mainly a compound of semioticians, deconstructionists and reader-oriented theories. In addition, there are many misconceptions about deconstruction present in the narrative. The narrator says that: "Since Derrida claimed that language, by its very nature, undermined any meaning it attempted to promote, Madeleine wondered how Derrida expected her to get his meaning. Maybe he didn't. That was why he deployed so much arcane terminology, so many loop-de-looping clauses."⁷ This is a common understanding of deconstruction in the novel but also in the academic community. Christopher Norris writes about such an approach that:

In the hands of less subtle and resourceful readers deconstruction can become — it is all too clear — a theoretical vogue as uniform and cramping as the worst New Critical dogma. At best it has provided the impetus for a total reevaluation of interpretative theory and practice, the effects of which have yet to be fully absorbed.⁸

Madeleine is the embodiment of such a reader but also of the atmosphere that surrounds her. At Eugenides' Brown University in 1982, but not only there, semiotics and theories that evolved from it are in the eyes of some critics what breaks the sacred sanctuary and destroys the tradition. Especially after the publication of *Deconstruction and Criticism* (1979) and Jacques Derrida's *Of Grammatology* (1967, 1976 in English) there was a war spreading all over faculties challenging the *status quo* in literary studies. What the narrator describes as Madeleine's reaction echoes René Wellek's "Destroying Literary Studies" (1988). It is "an attempt to destroy literary studies from the inside. The attempt seems to have succeeded in certain academic circles; it has enlisted the support of a number of journals and has affected many students, apparently all over the country."⁹ We are dealing with a reaction to a certain tradition of reading books which is challenged by semiotics and deconstruction. We can immediately object to the definition of such a tradition. There is no undivided literary tradition that would delineate the rules for writing and reading. Such a tradition has been altered

⁷ Eugenides, *The Marriage Plot*, 47.

⁸ Christopher Norris, *Deconstruction: Theory and Practice* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 17.

⁹ René Wellek, "Destroying Literary Studies," *New Symposium* (1983): 1.

and challenged for centuries. And yet, the narrator has subscribed to the idea that there is a tradition that needs to be defended and protected. Due to this approach, in comparison with the tradition, semiotics and deconstruction are identified as mere trends. In this case, Madeleine states that “what had been marginal was now mainstream.”¹⁰ The narrator then explains that

Almost overnight it became laughable to read writers like Cheever or Updike, who wrote about the suburbia Madeleine and most of her friends had grown up in, in favor of reading the Marquis de Sade, who wrote about anally deflowering virgins in eighteen-century France.¹¹

Madeleine is disturbed and disgusted from what her classmates are reading. Semiotics 211, which is the biggest source of her disturbance, is taught by a professor who was “converted to the new faith over cassoulet”¹² and one of the most popular ideas circulating at Madeleine’s college is “to kill the father.” During a discussion with her ex-boyfriend, Madeleine is questioned about who her father is, whether it is Susan Sontag or Virginia Woolf. (It is interesting that both suggested fathers are women.) And she replies: “In my case, my father really is my father,”¹³ suggesting that she is not participating in any experiments that are currently trendy. In addition, the participants of the seminar are deliberately described as eccentrics and their ideas are often ridiculed. As the narrator describes: “Everyone in the room was so spectral-looking that Madeleine’s natural healthiness seemed suspect, like a vote for Reagan.”¹⁴

On one hand, Madeleine admits that “after three years of taking literature courses, (she) had nothing like a firm critical methodology to apply to what she read. Instead, she had a fuzzy, unsystematic way of talking about books,”¹⁵ and as for her understanding of her studying experience she also adds that “college wasn’t like the real world. In the real world people dropped names based on their renown. In college, people dropped names based on their obscurity.”¹⁶ These are people who refer to names like Lyotard, Deleuze or Derrida and people who

¹⁰ Eugenides, *The Marriage Plot*, 24.

¹¹ Eugenides, *The Marriage Plot*, 24.

¹² Eugenides, *The Marriage Plot*, 20.

¹³ Eugenides, *The Marriage Plot*, 31.

¹⁴ Eugenides, *The Marriage Plot*, 25.

¹⁵ Eugenides, *The Marriage Plot*, 24.

¹⁶ Eugenides, *The Marriage Plot*, 23.

Madeleine “instinctually disapproved of – upper-middle-class kids who wore Doc Martens and anarchist symbols – made Madeleine dubious about the value of their enthusiasm.”¹⁷

What tradition and values then do Madeleine and by extension the narrator defend if she does not succumb to these new ideas that are present at her college? Madeleine realizes that the comfort found in her favourite texts is largely illusional as she is aware of stereotypes and distortion of these canonical texts and literary eras. However fascinating, “Victorians were a lot less Victorian than you thought”¹⁸ she observes. But despite this realization she does not wish to disqualify their relevance, and the relevance of the author, in opposition of what she perceives as the goals of semiotics and deconstruction. Anna Głąb in her take on love in literary fiction explains that: “What she (Madeleine) is looking for in literature is irreducible to a mere thematic trope, narrativization, or metafiction trick. [...] Madeleine believes in the meaning of words and in their compatibility with her own experience.”¹⁹ But so do many writers that are mentioned in the curriculum of Madeleine’s seminar despite how they are perceived in *The Marriage Plot*: Umberto Eco, Jacques Derrida, Jonathan Culler or Roland Barthes. In accordance with what has been said by Norris about less subtle readers of deconstruction, Madeleine represents a sort of rigid and conservative approach to literature and buys into the myths that surround semiotics and deconstruction. Many of the texts undergo generalization in Madeleine’s reading and they are treated as one disrupting entity.

Madeleine had a feeling that most semiotic theorists had been unpopular as children, often bullied or overlooked, and so had directed their lingering rage onto literature. They wanted to demote the author. They wanted a *book*, that hard-won, transcendent thing, to be a *text*, contingent, indeterminate, and open for suggestions. They wanted the reader to be the main thing. Because *they* were readers. [...] When it came to letters and literature, Madeleine championed a virtue that had fallen out of esteem: namely, clarity.²⁰

Semiotics itself would not have the power to demote the author, and deconstruction and reader-oriented theories may shift the attention from the author

¹⁷ Eugenides, *The Marriage Plot*, 23.

¹⁸ Eugenides, *The Marriage Plot*, 178.

¹⁹ Anna Głąb, “The Other as Text: The Ethics of Love in Jeffrey Eugenides’s *The Marriage Plot*,” *Renascence* 84 (2016): 270 – 271.

²⁰ Eugenides, *The Marriage Plot*, 42.

but they do not forbid considering the author. Madeleine desires clarity, but in the post-positivist world, what is presented as clarity, is often dogmatic. After breaking with the Enlightenment it is simply not possible to return to the positivist world without undergoing a significant totalization and simplification.

The Marriage Plot shows that the philosophy of trends is mainly “anti-” and it seems that everything that is “anti-” does not have any real value. It is stated by the narrator that the appeal of these new authors is because they are “anti-imperialist, anti-bourgeois, anti-patriarchal, and anti-everything a smart young feminist should be against.”²¹ However, Madeleine’s strict defence of what she considers “good literature” is also very much “anti-”. In comparison, in Madeleine, Eugenides materializes the same sentiment suggested by T.S. Eliot in “Tradition and the Individual Talent” with her unequivocal admiration for the writers of the past and the necessity to connect with them in order to move forward, but it is one of Eliot’s more conservative comments on literature. Eliot writes:

This historical sense which is a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional. And it is at the same time what makes a writer more acutely conscious of his place in time, of his own contemporaneity.²²

What is missing in Madeleine’s attitude to literature is the part where literature moves forward, and also a sort of understanding that the literary tradition is not frozen in time. This shift does not happen because of “unpopular semiotics theorists”. It is a necessity in this fast-changing world.

The following quote is also from Eliot’s essay:

The existing order is complete before the new work arrives; for order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the *whole* existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered; and so the relations, proportions, values of each work of art toward the whole are readjusted; and this is conformity between the old and the new.²³

Madeline does not realize that what she perceives as the canonical literary tradition is in fact an ever-changing mass of literary texts. Any change that happens in literary theory is labelled as a trend.

²¹ Eugenides, *The Marriage Plot*, 24.

²² T.S. Eliot, “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” *Perspecta* 19 (1982): 37.

²³ Eliot, “Tradition,” 37.

“Trends” that are targeted in *The Marriage Plot* are not only the domain of literature. Madeleine’s approach to the literary and the political is very similar: “Going to college in the moneymaking eighties lacked a certain radicalism. Semiotics was the first thing that smacked of revolution.”²⁴ When talking about her sister Alwyn growing up in the sixties and the seventies:

she realized that her sister’s iconoclasm and liberationist commitments had just been part of a trend. Alwyn had done the things she had done and voiced the political opinions she’d voiced because all her friends were acting and talking the same way.²⁵

On the whole, Madeleine’s response is an existential reaction to the end of the literary and political order. She attempts to return back to the previous order. However, such an order does not exist anymore.

1.3 Love triangle – ideal readers and ideal authors

Marshall Boswell in “The Rival Lover” focuses on the relationships within the main love triangle of the novel and compares the traditions and approaches which the three characters, Madeleine, Leonard and Mitchell represent. Boswell concludes that Madeleine becomes “a resistant reader who nevertheless maintains her love of the literature she interrogates.”²⁶ That is, she is able to become “the ideal reader” who can appreciate literature even after her encounter with semiotics, and what is more, she can use new approaches to enrich the discourse. Or we can understand her stance in a more pessimist way in which Madeleine seems to fall victim to what Norris describes happened to structuralism: “What started as a powerful protest against ruling critical assumptions ended up as just one more available method for saying new things about well-worn texts.”²⁷

Boswell also suggests that there is an ongoing struggle for the reader’s attention between Leonard and Mitchell, and by extension between David Foster Wallace and Eugenides himself: “Eugenides stages an artistic battle between himself and Wallace that parodies Wallace’s own self-conscious critiques of Harold Bloom’s *The Anxiety of Influence*.”²⁸ Boswell is convinced that Eugenides

²⁴ Eugenides, *The Marriage Plot*, 24.

²⁵ Eugenides, *The Marriage Plot*, 184.

²⁶ Marshall Boswell, “The Rival Lover: David Foster Wallace and the Anxiety of Influence in Jeffrey Eugenides’s *The Marriage Plot*,” *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 62, no. 3 (Fall 2016): 514.

²⁷ Norris, *Deconstruction*, 2.

²⁸ Boswell, “The Rival Lover,” 500.

not only parodies the traditional Victorian triangle but also the poststructuralist strategies in cahoots with postmodernism. Leonard Bankhead, the second person in *The Marriage Plot* love triangle, is a brilliant and charming biology student whose dream is the ultimate merge with literature, to become the tradition. He desires to survive his death by becoming an adjective, to become Bankheadian as there is the Kafkaesque, the Joycean, the Shakespearean or the Nabokovian; despite his diagnosis with manic depression. Leonard does not realize that becoming an adjective does not mean being resistant to decay and distortion. After the tradition is established, the language can change and the word that once became a tradition can disappear again. A trend becomes a tradition, and the tradition eventually transforms itself. What remains from the tradition is a set of stereotypical features that allow categorization but no deeper insight. Not even becoming an adjective prevents a complete eradication from history. Traditions are as unstable as trends.

Boswell describes similarities between Wallace and Leonard: the bandana, the Skoal chewing tobacco, his sexual charisma, mental problems and even direct quotes. One example he mentions is Wallace's quote "Do you have my saliva? Somebody took my saliva, because I don't have it,"²⁹ uttered by both Leonard in *The Marriage Plot* and by Wallace in his profile in *The New York Times Magazine* written by Frank Bruni.³⁰ And we can also add some similarities between their characters. Wallace's short story "Depressed Person" from *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (1999) features a female character that constantly phones the people from her "support system", during the day or night, to their homes or workplaces to share her anxieties.

The friends whom the depressed person reached out for supper and tried to open up to and share at least the contextual shape of her unceasing psychic agony and feelings of isolation with numbered around half a dozen and underwent a certain amount of rotation.³¹

In comparison, Leonard is shown using the same coping strategy:

²⁹ Eugenides, *The Marriage Plot*, 173.

³⁰ Frank Bruni, "The Grunge American Novel," *The New York Times*, March 24, 1996, <https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/97/03/16/reviews/wallace-v-profile.html>.

³¹ David Foster Wallace, "Depressed Person," in *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2009) Kindle.

Slowly it began to dawn on Leonard's friends that it didn't matter whom Leonard called on the phone. He forgot who was on the other end and, whenever one person managed to hang up, Leonard called somebody else and picked up right where he'd left off.³²

Despite these striking similarities, Eugenides denied any connection between the two:

Interviewer: How did the rumor get started that Leonard is based on David Foster Wallace? Was it just that the character wears a bandana and work boots?

JE: I'm glad you called it a rumor. It just got started by *New York Magazine's* online Vulture site and they stated it not as a question but as a fact, and it seemed to flow from that. I'm waiting for it to pass by. Now people are saying there are so many differences between [Leonard and David Foster Wallace], the basic one being that Wallace didn't even have manic depression. I think they're reading too much into the bandanna. I was thinking Guns N' Roses and heavy metal guys, but what can you do?³³

It is possible that the similarities between Leonard and Wallace are unintentional and subconscious, but it does not seem to be the case. Eugenides' denial seems to be meaningless and what is more, it creates some tension in the relationship between the author and the reader. We can again remember how Martin Paul Eve defines sincerity which is "based on checking future actions against previous speech and behaviour". If sincerity is meant to be limited by the text and by the novel, then there is no issue, but if sincerity should also include the author's statements outside of the text, for instance in an interview, then sincerity can become problematic.

William H. Pritchard in "Deconstructed" points out some other problematic features of the novel. He focuses on the text's realism and the inability of many to relate to the characters of Eugenides' novels. For Pritchard, realism lies in the novel's attempt to make the characters truer than the characters of the other two Eugenides' novels. The problem he identifies in the novel is that: "Once again Eugenides's impulse to strike off a good formulation with lively coupling is at odds with the novelist's determination to write realist fiction."³⁴ And Pritchard

³² Eugenides, *The Marriage Plot*, 108.

³³ Jeffrey Eugenides, "Questions for Jeffrey Eugenides," interview by Jessica Grose, *Slate*, Slate Group, October 10, 2011, <https://slate.com/culture/2011/10/jeffrey-eugenides-interview-the-marriage-plot-and-david-foster-wallace-rumors.html>.

³⁴ William H. Pritchard, "Deconstructed," *Commonweal* (January 2012): 29.

also argues that “we aren’t moved to take seriously her (Madeleine’s) feelings”.³⁵ What Pritchard writes about the novel’s failure to create characters to whom the reader can be related may be subjective, as Eugenides’ depiction of a young adult woman who is at odds with her superiors and peers at university can appeal to many; but he is correct in assuming that some of Madeleine’s ideas can be alienating, regarding her proneness to misconceptions and rigidity. There are then two opposing movements in the novel: an attempt to entice the reader with Madeleine’s “counterculture” ideas and to alienate the reader. Pritchard does not elaborate much on the lack of realism in the novel, except for introducing a few examples. For instance, he invokes the passage when Leonard writes a 123-paper about Fichte over the weekend and returns home with a bright orange hunting vest. Pritchard correctly identifies this as a caricature of the character, but the use of caricatures does not equal a lack of realism.

There are more critics that focus on the novel’s discrepancies with realistic representation. Lee Konstantinou presents *The Marriage Plot* as an example of a Bildungsroman of disillusioned realism. For Konstantinou, *The Marriage Plot* is one of the novels that exemplify the trajectory of the move from naiveté through irony, to cynicism to postirony. He writes that “the book thus simultaneously dramatizes the journey of its characters, its author and its implied readers; all emerge from the gauntlet of postmodernism on firmer foundations, having rolled back both postmodern form and postmodern content, weary but non-cynical realists.”³⁶

We can see a similar argument to that of Boswell, however this time with a focus on realism. In both critics’ arguments Madeleine comes through a transformation and emerges a “better reader” and a “better realist.” There is a shift in Madeleine’s selection of readings with Madeleine willingness to intellectually deal with Roland Barthes; however there is no evidence that the attempt on realism is different at the end and at the beginning of the book. It is valid to talk about firmer foundations and new tools to deal with older texts, as is to talk about new perspectives that come for instance with feminist reading. However, if

³⁵ Pritchard, “Deconstructed,” 28.

³⁶ Lee Konstantinou, “Four Faces of Postirony,” in *Metamodernism*, ed. Robin van den Akker, Alison Gibbons and Timotheus Vermeulen (London, New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2017), 97.

anyone changes it is not Madeleine but the actual reader of the novel, who is able to compare various perspectives of the characters.

What is more crucial in the novel is what Boswell describes as Madeleine's attempts at deconstruction of Barthes's deconstruction of love. In the essay he claims that:

By jumping past Barth's metafictional program and moving directly to post-1970s literary theory as the novel's primary metafictional target – that is, by exchanging John Barth with Roland Barthes – Eugenides enacts a generational critique of Barthian postmodernism directly indebted to Wallace himself.³⁷

Boswell here refers to Wallace's "Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way" which is identified by Boswell as an early critique of postmodern irony. It follows John Barth's argument that if the nineteenth-century bourgeois novel is an exhausted mode of writing, then a novelist should write a novel which demonstrates the hollow conventionality of bourgeois realism. That does not create a naïve novel but a text that is self-reflexive and viable – as long as it is done with ironic intent. Boswell sees a similar and complex strategy in Wallace's "Westward", one that recognizes Barth but also criticizes him especially because Barthian postmodernism became part of popular art, a problem that Wallace also discusses in detail in "E Unibus Pluram". The same method can be spotted in *The Marriage Plot* which pays homage to Wallace but also criticizes him through Leonard and his weaknesses, especially his relationships with women, his mental problems and withdrawal from lithium. Despite this direct connection to Wallace, Boswell writes that "*The Marriage Plot* isn't merely derivative of Wallace and his arguments about the function of metafiction and his hopes for a postironic return to sentiment and reader-writer interaction."³⁸

For Boswell, *The Marriage Plot* deliberately stages an artistic battle between Wallace and Eugenides and arranges for a victory of its author. Many references and allusions to literature, to literary tradition and to Wallace himself supports Boswell's assumptions about Eugenides' strategy. Boswell anticipates that Madeleine is the ideal reader to both Wallace and Eugenides as she is in the middle of the love triangle between Mitchell and Leonard and can read fiction

³⁷ Boswell, "The Rival Lover," 505.

³⁸ Boswell, "The Rival Lover," 506.

both cynically and naively. At the end of the novel, she is abandoned by Leonard, flirts briefly with Mitchell but in the end, she is left alone, open to new possibilities. Through her persona, Wallace is discredited and forgotten, and Eugenides is recognized as the winner, even if temporarily.

Madeleine identifies her doubts with the rupture caused by semiotics and deconstruction; however, this rupture could be, in fact, caused by postmodernism and postmodern irony in particular – as all trends in the novels, it started as an attempt to change the status quo but by the time it was swallowed by television culture, as Wallace suggested, it became destructive. When after the invalidation of the geocentric model an important philosophical era ended, it fell to Cartesians to establish a new tradition and belief systems. It is improbable that either Madeleine, Leonard or Mitchell can do the same for literature after postmodernism. Madeleine is not a valid option as she falls victim to many misconceptions about literature and is vulnerable to rigidity and close-mindedness. Leonard conveniently disappears from the novel and the third character from the love triangle, Mitchell Grammaticus, an alleged embodiment of Eugenides himself, does not provide any definite direction for the future way of literature.

Mitchell undergoes a journey to India in search for spiritual enlightenment and of some other, non-Western, reality where he is not overlooked by the woman he loves. It is of some interest that Mitchell experiences a period of severe hallucinations caused by disease and starvation during his journey to the east. The visions he has seem to be the most vivid and most authentic experiences. They are on the verge between hallucinatory and spiritual but in reality, they have no meaning, and so there is no comfort in the eastern tradition which can be found for instance in Eliot's "The Waste Land". It is Mitchell who points out that there is no Eastern or Western tradition per se in tracking the philosophy of nonviolence from Christianity, through Tolstoy and Gandhi to Martin Luther King. Mitchell concludes the book with a realization that "in addition to never living with Madeleine, he would never go to divinity school, either. It was unclear what he was going to do with his life, but he wasn't going to be a monk, or a minister, or even a scholar."³⁹ The future for Mitchell is undetermined.

³⁹ Eugenides, *The Marriage Plot*, 405.

In “E Unibus Pluram” Wallace presents a few possibilities in which the writer can continue if interested in overcoming postmodern irony. There are some approaches available for the reader in *The Marriage Plot*. However, they are always shown as inadequate and as dead ends – be it Victorian literature, deconstruction, modernism, literary realism, or the texts of David Foster Wallace. It is perhaps also because of certain nostalgia that is felt towards the past. The past “when it was OK to be American in Paris”⁴⁰. It is a prevalent sentiment of *The Marriage Plot* that being an American in the late 20th century and early 21st century is not “cool” anymore. And being an American writer at this time is a delicate position to be in.

In conclusion, *The Marriage Plot* is a search for the lost great America, both political and literary, because the contemporary state is unsatisfying. It has been a recurring concern to return to the Golden Age of literature ever since the times of Roman Empire. However, what is the Golden Age of American literature? *The Marriage Plot* does not present a viable tradition or a successful tool for reformation and so the search for the New America and the new direction of literature is still in progress. What the novel does however, is establishing that American literature is greatly indebted to David Foster Wallace, but that he is not to be put on the pedestal. Ultimately, *The Marriage Plot* can become the subject of the same criticism Madeleine directs at new trends – that it is based only on the philosophy of “anti-“ but it does not have any real substance. Especially, if the novel calls for “no games, only sincerity” but presents an elaborate network of misconceptions and myths to be deciphered. The question is, is it a flaw of the novel that it is not capable of envisioning the new path for literature, or is such a vision simply impossible in the post-postmodernist literary landscape?

⁴⁰ Eugenides, *The Marriage Plot*, 141.

Chapter 2 Nostalgia and Entropy in *The Virgin Suicides*

2.1 Evolution of the suburbs

The perception of American suburbs has changed considerably throughout the last two centuries. Jan Nijman in *The Life of the North American Suburbs* writes that “towards the end of the 20th century, the notion of the suburb had lost its coherence, both in material and in discursive terms”¹ and the suburbs became more and more diversified. Yet at first, the suburbs were seen mostly negatively as places harbouring poor and undesirable citizens, contrasting with urban centres – the luxurious parts of the city. Later, the view of suburbs shifted radically and the 19th-century suburbs began to be seen as a haven for the elites and the privileged. Nijman writes that there was an initial cultural impetus drawing people to the suburbs, but it was soon accompanied by economic motives. “The transformation of agricultural lands just outside the city into residential building plots was by definition a lucrative business.”² The suburbs were places of prestige combined with business, to which Nijman also adds a third motive: “The individualized nuclear family was very much an American institution (closely related to the American Dream) and demanded a single-family home – which was easier to realize in the spacious suburbs than in the city centre.”³ So, from negative connotations to positive connotations, from cultural intentions to financial motivation the suburbs slowly evolved into centres for new American families and for the realization of the American dream. And yet there are descriptions such as those of John Cheever who writes in “Moving Out”:

My God, the suburbs! They encircled the city's boundaries like enemy territory and we thought of them as a loss of privacy, a cesspool of conformity and a life of indescribable dreariness in some split-level village where the place name appeared in the *New York Times* only when some bored housewife blew off her head with a shotgun.⁴

¹ Jan Nijman, “Introduction: Elusive Suburbia,” *The Life of the North American Suburbs* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020), 9.

² Nijman, “Introduction,” 5.

³ Nijman, “Introduction,” 5.

⁴ John Cheever, “Moving Out,” *Collected Stories and Other Writings* (New York: Library of America, 2009), 977.

In contrast with the idealized image of the American suburb and the perfect American home there are also problems caused by the suburban ennui and alienation.

2.2. Nostalgia for the Detroit ruins

Jeffrey Eugenides' *The Virgin Suicides*, published in 1993, is a nostalgic flashback to the suburbs of the 1970s. On some level, the novel presents a longing for a simple, utopian world, where every effect has a cause, a longing for a world which is positivist in its explicability. And yet, it is not a depiction that invites a search into an uncontaminated origin or a lament over the lost past; nor is it a claim for authenticity hidden in the 1970s suburbs. There is a desire for a simpler world but at the same time this idea is exposed as deeply flawed – perhaps the major conflict explored in this chapter.

Nostalgia in *The Virgin Suicides* could be understood in the pre-romantic Rousseauian sense of a vehicle for political revolution. This argument can be supported by the fact that there is a clear distinction between adults and teenagers in *The Virgin Suicides* – even though childhood in *The Virgin Suicides* is not idealized, the narrators' perspectives are shown to be superior to that of adults. Nicola Sayers writes that “the narrator(s) do not long for some idyllic childhood innocence, as some critics have suggested; they long for the ability they themselves once had to be awed, to wonder, to be unknowing: to meet existence without the protective, habituated, gaze of *Erlebnis*,”⁵ which is understood from Walter Benjamin's essays in the sense of the reductive logic that dominates adult life. Such a nostalgic hope can then be combined into a possibility of the youth rebellion and a hope for revolution. Sayers also writes that:

At one fell swoop the strangely disembodied collective narrators lose not only their innocence – their own youth and childlike innocence – but they also lose an innocent America, to which they hark back with intense nostalgia: a more ‘real’ America, one with actual winters, ‘vast snowdrifts, days of canceled school.’⁶

⁵ Nicola Sayers, *The Promise of Nostalgia: Reminiscence, Longing and Hope in Contemporary American Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 2020), 147-148.

⁶ Martin Heusser, “Et in Arcadia Ego: The Pastoral Aesthetics of Suburbia in Jeffrey Eugenides' *The Virgin Suicides*,” *Swiss Papers in English Language and Literature* (2007): 175.

However, this image of America is largely illusional, a childish dream and a futile hope. And even though the narrators of the novel represent the more authoritative power in the narrative, they do not reveal any desire for a revolution. This Rousseauian understanding of nostalgia does not seem to fit *The Virgin Suicides*.

As he said in one of the interviews, Eugenides' entire childhood:

coincided with the demise of Detroit. I grew up watching houses and buildings fall apart and then disappear. It imbued my sense of the world with a strong elegiac quality – a direct experience of the fragility and evanescence of the material world.⁷

Eugenides' own childhood America is not an innocent place. It is a place which is falling apart. In another interview he stated that:

Though decline and disintegration have figured strongly in my books, by temperament I'm a classicist, that is, someone who attempts to preserve the past in as orderly and lasting ways as possible. Most days, my chief impulse is to expend my energy in *opposing* the force of entropy, especially when it comes to literature. Whatever my aesthetic program is, it has a conservative streak. I emphasize the root of the word here: *to conserve*. To keep safe. To protect what you've been given and not squander it.⁸

The demise of Detroit is an important topic for Eugenides but simple recording and preserving cannot effectively stop disintegration. And most certainly, it cannot preserve Detroit. Recording is an imperfect and passive process. It is possible to conserve a variant of the past, but it is only an image of the past that is distorted and idealized. Often the past preserved is only a fantasy, which is a problem that Eugenides never addresses in his interviews. Or, on the other hand, the problem with capturing the past is that the captured memory does not live up to expectations. Jacques Derrida in "This Strange Institution Called Literature" writes that "the discursive forms we have available to us, the resources in terms of objectivizing archivation, are so much poorer than what happens (or fails to happen, whence the excess of hyper-totalization.)"⁹

A question that is more acute is whether this Detroit portrayed in *The Virgin Suicides* is worth preserving, or what part of American history should be

⁷ Jeffrey Eugenides, "The Art of Fiction No. 215: Jeffrey Eugenides," interview by James Gibbons, *Paris Review* 199 (Winter 2011): 132.

⁸ Eugenides, interview by J r my Potier.

⁹ Jacques Derrida, "This Strange Institution Called Literature," interview by Derek Attridge, *Acts of Literature* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 35.

preserved. As mentioned before, *The Virgin Suicides* takes place sometime in the 1970s in the predominantly white suburbs. Is this a place that needs to be protected? On the contrary, the seemingly idyllic suburbs in *The Virgin Suicides* are part of the national U.S. narrative that needs to be dismantled.

The past preserved can however always have a nostalgic value, no matter how distorted the memory is. And quite often, a memory is more valuable because of its distortion as negative events are forgotten or transformed. Nicola Sayers writes about the film adaptation of *Virgin Suicides* stating that “the suburban imagery that Coppola presents us with primes the viewer — straightaway for a kind of nostalgic reception — as much for previously consumed ideas and images of ‘suburbia’ as for any lived reality.”¹⁰ However, the novel is not as susceptible to consumed nostalgia as Coppola’s film. Nostalgia in the novel is closer to the reflective nostalgia as understood by Andreas Huyssen in his analysis of the ruins in Giovanni Battista Piranesi’s paintings. It is more reflective and critical. Huyssen writes that “we are nostalgic for the ruins of modernity because they still seem to hold a promise that has vanished from our own age: the promise of an alternative future.”¹¹ However, Piranesi

rather remains haunted by the threatening aura of ruins, by their oppressive interlocking of past and present, nature and culture, death and life. The work undermines any enlightened and secure standpoint in the course of time and in the location in space, and it is quite distant from the avant-garde’s ethos of alternative futures.¹²

Huyssen elaborates on the idea of alternative futures which are suppressed in Piranesi but are still a possibility. Decline in the essay is connected to ruins in the form of abandoned auto factories in Detroit or furnaces of former steelworks in Ruhr. Ruins in *The Virgin Suicides*, represented by the demise of Detroit and the suburbs are nowhere near romantic. At first a symbol of social prestige, the house in *The Virgin Suicides* slowly dilapidates as the confines of the Lisbon sisters become stricter and their suicides more imminent. Similarly to some works of American Southern writers, the house becomes a metonymy of the state of its inhabitants and the malady that has taken over the society while disintegrating it: “For even as the house began to fall apart, casting out whiffs of rotten wood and

¹⁰ Sayers, *The Promise of Nostalgia*, 135.

¹¹ Andreas Huyssen, “Nostalgia for Ruins,” *Grey Room* 23 (Spring 2006): 8.

¹² Huyssen, “Nostalgia for Ruins,” 19.

soggy carpet, this other smell began wafting from the Lisbons', invading our dreams and making us wash our hands over and over again."¹³ Eugenides remembers that Detroit

landmarks and major buildings were condemned and demolished. On top of that, almost all of the wondrously beautiful elms trees in the city died off. Detroit was once known as 'The City of Trees.' Whenever I go back now the absence of those cathedral elms fills me with the most acute sense of pain and loss.¹⁴

Elms also appear in *The Virgin Suicides*. "The elm in the Lisbons' front yard (see Exhibit #1] was among the condemned, and with the weather still cool a truckful of men arrived to cut it down."¹⁵ The elm is labelled as an "exhibit" and its study is a part of the narrators' scientific research of the suburbs and the girls' suicides. The Lisbon sisters, in a rare occurrence of leaving their home, rush out of their house to save the tree as it has been the favourite tree of their dead sister, Cecilia, who was the first from the family to have committed suicide. They temporarily save the tree but after their deaths all trees are wiped out from the street. Preservation is not possible in the novel and nostalgia in the novel is felt, but is often — if only for a moment — pushed out by more disturbing images, be it disappearance of trees from the suburban street or five unexpected suicides.

2.3 Hierarchy of suicides

In the centre of *The Virgin Suicides* are suicides of five suburban girls: Cecilia, Bonnie, Mary, Therese and Lux. There are other suicides in the novel, but they are not deemed important — these are "just" victims of deindustrialization and decentralization of automobile industry. The narrator (or narrators as the story is narrated in the plural "we") reminisces that "owing to extensive layoffs at the automotive plants, hardly a day passed without some despairing soul sinking beneath the tide of the recession, men found in garages with cars running, or twisted in the shower, still wearing work clothes."¹⁶ In comparison with the deaths

¹³ Jeffrey Eugenides, *The Virgin Suicides* (London: Fourth Estate, 2013), 160.

¹⁴ Jeffrey Eugenides, "An Interview with Jeffrey Eugenides," interview by Jérémy Potier, *Transatlantica: Revue d'Études Américaines* 1 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.4000/transatlantica.155228>.

¹⁵ Eugenides, *The Virgin Suicides*, 172.

¹⁶ Eugenides, *The Virgin Suicides*, 89.

of young girls they are surely tragic but seem almost acceptable in the eyes of the narrators. The narrators of the novel are never moralizing and so strangely, it is never stated that such an idea of hierarchization of suicides should not be acceptable. Disturbingly, it is never proclaimed that all lives have the same value. It is perhaps, up to the reader to judge and moralize when met with the idea that lives of five white suburban girls are more important than lives of workers from the automobile industry. And yet, it seems that people perceive deaths of younger people as more tragic. Often it seems that the younger the person, the bigger tragedy, no matter how wrong such an idea sounds. This hierarchization can be then imposed on the novel only because of this everyday experience — the younger the life, the bigger shock and grief. But there is also another question: if suicide is committed as a part of political act, does it have a bigger importance? Everything bad in the novel happens outside of the suburbs. Suburbs are a promise of perfection and happy comfortable life. Suicides do not belong there, and that is perhaps why the suicides are so strongly in the foreground. At first, to constantly break the utopian perfection that is seemingly built by nostalgia; and secondly, to make its deconstruction even more powerful. That is why the setting of *The Virgin Suicides* is strangely vague, thereby enhancing the utopian quality of the suburbs. It is never explicitly stated where the novel takes place but Brian Jansen mentions several references that “cumulatively place the narrative in Grosse Pointe, Michigan, on the western edge of Detroit, one of the most affluent suburbs of the city, in the early 1970s — likely 1972–1973.”¹⁷ Eugenides confirmed this assumption when he stated that: “The Virgin Suicides was, oddly, one of the first things I set in my hometown, even though I didn’t name it.”¹⁸

Another issue that emerges here is that the “despairing souls sinking beneath the tide of the recession” are nameless and raceless, except for when “on every corner a black maid waited for the bus,”¹⁹ and when the girls “recalled the race riots, when tanks had appeared at the end of the block and National Guardsmen

¹⁷ Brian Jansen, “Oddly Shaped Emptinesses’: Capital, the Eerie, and the Place(less)ness of Detroit in Jeffrey Eugenides’ *Virgin Suicides*.” *Comparative American Studies* 16, nos. 3-4 (2018): 106.

¹⁸ Jeffrey Eugenides, “The Art of Fiction No. 215: Jeffrey Eugenides,” interview by Maddie Crum, *Vulture*, October 3, 2017, <https://www.vulture.com/2017/10/jeffrey-eugenides-fresh-complaint-masculinity-in-fiction.html>.

¹⁹ Eugenides, *The Virgin Suicides*, 120.

had parachuted into their backyards.”²⁰ This brief episode of the Detroit Riots is hidden between talking about trees on one page and mentioning a *Cosmo* survey about orgasms on the other. Detroit suburbs in the 1970s were predominantly inhabited by white Americans and as the novel focuses only on the suburbs, it is blind to other events happening beyond their sphere. Claire W. Herbert summarizes the issues causing urban decline in the United States as follows:

Declining cities tend to suffer from high levels of vacancy; property abandonment and blight, high crime, jobless, and unemployment rates; low property values; and poor service provision. Histories of racial conflict and white flight are common among declining cities, resulting in stark racial segregation between majority black cities and their majority white suburbs; or even within the cities themselves.²¹

The white suburbs are in the centre of the novel but their characteristic is never explicitly connected to white flight or to issues happening in declining Detroit.

The same can be said about issues within the nuclear family. Stephanie Coontz in her study of the family and the myths surrounding the concept of family writes about the nostalgia trap as, “nostalgia for a safer, more placid past fosters historical amnesia about these precedents, deforming our understanding of what is and is not new in contemporary violence and adolescent alienation.”²² The novel deliberately does not depict what the community does not see and it does not depict what the community wishes to ignore. There are hints to what is happening beyond the suburbs or in the individual houses but they are never elaborated on. The fact that Grosse Point of *The Virgin Suicides* is without any visible problems, either connected to race, family, or existential questions up until the suicides of the Lisbon sisters, suggests that the novel induces nostalgia in such a manner as to be broken easily if some of the issues are only followed. In the end, the absence of such issues arises strongly as a critique of nostalgic depiction. It is especially visible in comparison with Eugenides’ second novel, *Middlesex* which takes place in Detroit and Grosse Point as well, but it is Grosse Point fully declared filled with racial prejudice, poverty and violence. If *The Virgin Suicides* took place in *Middlesex*’s Detroit, the critique of nostalgia would lose one layer of criticism.

²⁰ Eugenides, *The Virgin Suicides*, 119.

²¹ Claire W. Herbert, *A Detroit Story: Urban Declines and the Rise of Property Informality* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2021), 14.

²² Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), 81.

However, by such a method, Eugenides can be quickly accused of white elitism. Brian Jansen writes about this ellipsis:

It obliquely tells a story about Detroit's decline through the lens of the white suburbanites largely complicit in that decline – those left out of the accounts that dominated news media in the wake of Detroit's bankruptcy, for example. The danger of doing so, of course, is that Eugenides is by this narrative decision somewhat complicit in the same erasure that the novel decries – using white voices to 'explain' a city that is 87% African American and contributing in the process to a body of 'Detroit Literature' that is overwhelmingly white.²³

And the second weakness of nostalgic longing is uncovered by the narrators themselves. It is the impossibility to understand one's actions. In the ideal setting, every cause would have an effect, everything could be explained, every meaning could be the only meaning. Curiosity and taste for morbidity are what makes people stop and stare at the venues of accidents and what brings the people of the *Virgin Suicides* suburbs to theorise about the suicides of Lisbon sisters. It is a desire to make sense of events that are not understandable. There are no definite answers. It is never quite clear if these suicides are a social act and an act of defiance or simply acts of desperate and deprived individuals. Perhaps it is both. But the motives for their behaviour become more and more abstract in the eyes of onlookers. As the narrators observe “more and more, people forgot about the individual reasons why the girls may have killed themselves, the stress disorders and insufficient neurotransmitters, and instead put the deaths down to the girls' foresight in predicting decadence.”²⁴

2.4 Scientists and narrators against entropy

The suburbs begin to disintegrate following Detroit's deindustrialization and the decline of Detroit's automobile industry. The people and houses alike are reclaimed by death and nature. Robert Smithson writes about entropy: “We live in defined structures, we are surrounded by reference systems — but nature dismantles them, taking them back to an earlier state of non-integrity.”²⁵ The paradox of entropy is that it is a movement, but it is a movement leading to

²³ Jansen, “Oddly Shaped Emptiness,” 112.

²⁴ Eugenides, *The Virgin Suicides*, 238.

²⁵ Robert Smithson, “Art Through the Camera's Eye,” in *The Collected Writings*, ed. Jack Flam (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996), 375.

inertia, disorder and homogeneity. Tony Tanner addresses this issue by focusing on the constructive movement and repetitive motions:

There is a difference between the organic, constructive movement of something (or someone) burgeoning into a full realization of its inherent potential development and the sort of mindless repetitive motions [...] that denote a gradual collapsing towards inertia and death.”²⁶

In this respect, Tanner mentions Pope’s dunces, Dickens’s automata or Burroughs’s addicts but also repetitive industrial and post-industrial society: “Order, if it is dedicated to the procuring of ‘uniform motion’, may in fact accelerate entropy and not counter it.”²⁷ The question is whether actions of the sisters in *The Virgin Suicides* accelerate or counter entropy. Tanner also adds that the American hero,

like his creator wants to be a small counterforce to the prevailing entropic tendencies. The difficulty lies in the fact that ‘organization’ is the phenomenon which resists entropy. The problem of differentiating between that sort of organization which procures and protects intelligible life, and that sort of mechanical ‘order’ which induces anaesthesia and ultimately irreversible torpor, is one which may be said often to prove too difficult for the American hero.²⁸

Although it is problematic to speak of “intelligible life”, as it is impossible to speak of intelligibility in the post-positivist world, anaesthesia and mechanical order are terms still relevant for *The Virgin Suicides*. The lives of the Lisbon sisters are mechanical as they wander around their suburban house. Forced to act mechanically, they lose the ability to counter entropic tendencies. According to Norbert Wiener, the same anti-entropic properties can be assigned to life-imitating machines: “By its ability to make decisions it can produce around it a local zone of organization in a world whose general tendency is to run down.”²⁹ Key in resisting entropy are human actions and decisions. Activity, not passivity. The crucial term for Wiener is the ability to make decisions and he also points out that “in physics, the idea of progress opposes that of entropy, although there is no absolute contradiction between the two.”³⁰ On the other hand, talking about “entropology” Claude Lévi-Strauss writes that “taken as a whole, therefore,

²⁶ Tony Tanner, *City of Words* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 143.

²⁷ Tanner, *City of Words*, 144.

²⁸ Tanner, *City of Words*, 144.

²⁹ Norbert Wiener, *The Human Use of Human Beings* (London: Free Association Books, 1989), 34.

³⁰ Wiener, *The Human Use of Human Beings*, 38.

civilization can be described as a prodigiously complicated mechanism: Tempting as it would be to regard it as our universe's best hope of survival, its true function is to produce what physicists call entropy: inertia, that is to say."³¹

In general, *The Virgin Suicides* tends to elevate the advantages of nostalgic but critical reminiscing over the unconditioned belief in progress. Recalling Huyssen's understanding of nostalgia in Piranesi, he claims that

nostalgia counteracts, even undermines linear notions of progress, whether they are framed dialectically as philosophy of history or sociologically and economically as modernization. But nostalgic longing for a past is always also a longing for another place. Nostalgia can be a utopia in reverse.³²

And he also writes that "Piranesi's prisons and ruins can be read as allegories of a modernity whose utopia of freedom and progress, linear time and geometric space they not only question but cancel out."³³ If paintings can portray such complicated processes, then a novel should be able to do the same, and even better. But even though the novel does not believe in progress, it shows attempts to slow down entropy, not by progressing but for instance by saving a favourite tree. The tree in the novel is saved only temporarily but suicides have a potential to cause a more permanent change.

Nostalgic utopia in *The Virgin Suicides* is strongly disrupted by the suicides of the Lisbon sisters. Do they have the same effect on entropy and decline of Detroit? Is such a suicide of the same quality as actions undertaken by the characters in Thomas Pynchon's "Entropy" that are strongly resisting entropy? This early short story of Pynchon's contains topics elaborated on in his later works, and so the concept of entropy is still in its beginnings. But at the heart of this short story is a conviction that it is possible to slow down entropy by one's actions. The first character in "Entropy" is Meatball Mulligan who chooses activity over passivity and establishes order at his party by solving all problems instead of hiding. The second person is Callisto's girlfriend Aubade who breaks Callisto out of his self-imposed paralysis by breaking the glass in their apartment. "Hermetically sealed, it was a tiny enclave of regularity in the city's chaos, alien

³¹ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*, trans. John Russell (New York: Criterion Books, 1992), 397.

³² Huyssen, "Nostalgia for Ruins", 7.

³³ Huyssen, "Nostalgia for Ruins", 19.

to the vagaries of the weather, of national politics, of any civil disorder.”³⁴ Aubade breaks Callisto from his despair which is caused by fear of entropy, not only of the universe but also of society. “He found himself, in short, restating Gibb’s prediction in social terms, and envisioned a heat-death for his culture in which ideas, like heat-energy, would no longer be transferred, since each point in it would ultimately have the same quantity of energy; and intellectual motion would, accordingly, cease.”³⁵

As Callisto’s apartment is sealed from the world, so is the Lisbons’ house. In this respect, the first suicide of the Lisbon sister, Cecilia, is entropic. Her death causes worsening of her parents’ mental health, decline of the house and the isolation of the Lisbon sisters. It would be logical to think that the following suicides are antientropic and restorative. Stacey Olster observes how Pynchon’s characters deal with the universe moving to the state of entropy and concludes that

Pynchon faces both possibilities at the same time, that history is both an empty cipher and a repository of meaning. Because time seems to favor the one, Pynchon chooses to assist the other – and so as history approaches the zero, literature amalgamates the infinite. Rather than presaging the end of the world or the death of the novel, Pynchon restores a life of ambiguity.³⁶

According to Olster, there is ruin countered with rebirth in Pynchon. The ending of *The Virgin Suicides* is ambiguous but not with respect to ruin and rebirth. The deteriorating process in the suburbs continues even after the deaths of the remaining sisters.

We got to see how truly unimaginative our suburb was, everything laid out on a grid whose bland uniformity the trees had hidden, and the old ruses of differentiated architectural styles lost their power to make us feel unique.³⁷

And death is not followed by the possibility of rebirth. The suicides of the Lisbon sisters may seem antientropic, and logically they should be as they are decisions that may change the status quo. However, as the narrators observe, “what lingered after them was not life, which always overcomes natural death, but the most

³⁴ Thomas Pynchon, “Entropy”, *The Kenyon Review* 22, no.2 (Spring 1960): 279.

³⁵ Pynchon, “Entropy”, 284.

³⁶ Stacey Olster, *Reminiscence and Re-Creation in Contemporary American Fiction* (Cambridge, New York, Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 105.

³⁷ Eugenides, *The Virgin Suicides*, 237.

trivial list of mundane facts.”³⁸ *The Virgin Suicides* then has an entropic ending. What should be preserved is swallowed by entropy and eventually, some time after the suicides, the suburbs come back to the slow process of stable decline. The only point where Eugenides and Pynchon meet is then in the inability to pin down secure knowledge. As Olster details,

Indeed, the tension between the drive to interpret and an inability to make interpretation cohere into secure knowledge might be regarded as the central dilemma for Pynchon’s protagonists, and the key challenge for his readers. The desire to imaginatively reach a site of inhabitation untouched by the corrosive effects of entropy [...] holds out the possibility of an alternative politics, a moment of genuine transgression that signifies our resistance to the enforcing structures of any given culture.³⁹

Regarding the drive to interpret, Wiener writes that: “the scientist is always working to discover the order and organization of the universe, and thus playing a game against the arch enemy, disorganization.”⁴⁰ The narrators of *The Virgin Suicides* are very similar to Wiener’s scientist, examining the suburban universe, trying to organize the experience of the suburbs and understand it.

In the tradition of positivist science, the narrators’ conviction is that reporting and documenting can generate the truth — there are Therese’s chemistry write-ups, Bonnie’s history paper or Lux’s forged excuses from school, and sanitary products forgotten in their house. There are two contradicting forces at play: the positivistic conviction that science can explain various aspects of human life, and postmodernist aesthetics of consumer capitalism. Scientific explanation fails in the face of consumerism, and consumed products present a barrier in understanding. As is typical of postmodernist aesthetics of consumer capitalism it is a combination of a product and its brand that asserts the identity of the owner. It is a reconstruction of the personal identity through commodities. That is very close to the 19th-century realistic representation of people in literature. However, the narrators remind us that “even their assorted possessions arrayed at our feet didn’t reassert their existence, and nothing seemed more anonymous than a certain vinyl go-go purse, covered with gold chain, that could have belonged to any of the

³⁸ Eugenides, *The Virgin Suicides*, 242.

³⁹ Olster, *Reminiscence*, 105.

⁴⁰ Wiener, *The Human Use of Human Beings*, 34.

girls, or to any girl in the world.”⁴¹ This passage suggests that these commodities are universal and do not enforce any individuality, and so the narrators resist the consumerist idea that “the body (is) like a deposit to be mined in order to extract from it the invisible signs of happiness, health, beauty.”⁴²

Clearly, the sisters have their individualities despite what the narrators assume with their representation through commodities. The Lisbon sisters are always presented as one unit that lives and acts together. However, after the first feelings of confusion, there is always some degree of individuality revealed. One of the boys from the novel reported that “the girls had kicked him continually under the table, from every direction, so that he couldn’t tell who was doing it. [...]. Bonnie was the only one who didn’t give Peter Sissen a secret look or kick.”⁴³ Bonnie has a sharp nose, Therese a heavier face, Mary darker hair, Cecilia always wears a wedding dress after her first suicide attempt, Lux is the only one “who accorded with our image of the Lisbon girls. She radiated health and mischief,”⁴⁴ and she is also the only Lisbon girl that is sexually active. But the isolation of the house blurs all their peculiarities: “In the window where the one light burned, however, the shade tipped. A hand peeled it back revealing a hot yellow slice of face — Bonnie, Mary, Therese, or even Lux — looking down the street.”⁴⁵ With such limited options, their possessions are the only clues to their personae. Most of the information about the sisters is indirect. It is not something that the narrators witness, and the result image of the sisters is put together through their imagination. That explains why the narrators have a distorted conception of the angelic sisters.

The panelled house gleamed, and for the first few seconds the Lisbon girls were only a patch of glare like a congregation of angels. Then, however, our eyes got used to the light and informed us of something we had never realized: The Lisbon girls were all different people.⁴⁶

While the Lisbon girls are often perceived as a homogenous unit, the novel has a better access to the narrators. However, the group of narrators constantly changes,

⁴¹ Eugenides, *The Virgin Suicides*, 181.

⁴² Jean Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures* (London: SAGE, 2009), 132.

⁴³ Eugenides, *The Virgin Suicides*, 6-7

⁴⁴ Eugenides, *The Virgin Suicides*, 24.

⁴⁵ Eugenides, *The Virgin Suicides*, 135.

⁴⁶ Eugenides, *The Virgin Suicides*, 23.

and the narrative is always enriched by those who have information and those who can enter the fortress which is the Lisbons' house. Who is "we" is never quite determined; however many names are mentioned in connection with the "investigation." Peter Sissen, Paul Baldino, David Barker, Tim Winer (the brain), Chase Buell, Kevin Head, Trip Fontaine, Tom Faheem. Some names are mentioned only once, some are repeated. Even during the Homecoming, which is one of a few sporadic events the girls are allowed to go to, the "we" are not present as they watch the girls leave with Trip Fontaine, Parkie Denton, Kevin Head and Joe Hill Conley. These names can be therefore excluded from the "we" even though they are the main source of information. Trip Fontaine is a person who was the closest person to Lux, Parkie is chosen because of his possession of a Cadillac, Kevin because he helped tune up Trip's car and Joe because he won all school prizes and is considered to be a good suitor. These seemingly unimportant details are mentioned here to show that this is a suburb full of different characters. There is a sense of suburban community with many young people. However, their personalities are overlapping and as with the sisters, the most valuable quality of them are their possessions, like Parkie's Cadillac.

2.5 The search for truth

The narrators are not only scientists as is evident from their obsession with the girls. They are also watchers and voyeurs and, in a way, they can be also likened to fiction writers. As Wallace writes in "E Unibus Pluram:" "Fiction writers as a species tend to be oglers. They tend to lurk and to stare. The minute fiction writers stop moving, they stark lurking, and stare."⁴⁷ The novel does not elaborate on the idea of narrators being analogous to writers, but there is the same drive to watch that is common to both TV watchers and fiction writers. Fredric Jameson writes that: "every position on Postmodernism in culture — whether apologia or stigmatization — is also at one and the same time, and *necessarily*, an implicitly or explicitly political stance on the nature of multinational capitalism today."⁴⁸ As is *The Virgin Suicides* immune to comments on racial problems and problems in the

⁴⁷ David Foster Wallace, "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction," *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 13, no. 2 (Summer 1993): 151.

⁴⁸ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991): 3.

industry connected to capitalism, it is blind to the problems created by postmodernism and postmodern irony adapted into the pop culture. But it does not mean that the novel is not aware of these issues. It is the absence of any explicit criticism which makes *The Virgin Suicides* critical to these issues. Unfortunately, it also contributes to the novel being irritating as it is not willing to engage with them.

If the first problem with the scientific explanation is that it fails in the face of consumerism, the second issue arises from transformation of meanings in time and place. Once an item is scientifically recorded its meaning is captured in time and for that time only. The narrative is a compound of memories. A trunk can be connected to travelling as it can be associated with suicide. “In hindsight, Bonnie’s battered trunk lost its associations with travel and flight and became only what it was: a drop weight for a hanging, like sandbags in old Westerns.”⁴⁹ Material things then cannot have the explicatory quality desired by the narrator/scientist/voyeur. This supports the idea previously mentioned — that recording the past is an imperfect process as material things cannot be the storages of meanings despite the claims of consumerist capitalism. The result of the narrators’ search is that “they hadn’t heard us calling (...), calling them out of those rooms where they went to be alone for all time, alone in suicide, which is deeper than death, and where we will never find the pieces to put them back together.”⁵⁰

Eugenides never gives a satisfying explanation regarding the suicides. The novel presents only theories and possibilities and the narrators can never reach secure knowledge. The nostalgic feeling of the novel is in the end disqualified. There may be a hope for revolution and an alternative future, but the feelings of the narrators do not support this theory. The novel quite clearly shows the longing for a simpler and sporadically utopian world, but at the same time shows there are no shortcuts as this longing for a simpler world is unrealistic. Rather than nostalgia, the novel shows decline and death that is hidden behind the thin wall put together by nostalgia. Absence is the key word here, absence of the future a lack of answers. Again, Huyssen’s essay shows a similar tendency:

⁴⁹ Eugenides, *The Virgin Suicides*, 214-215.

⁵⁰ Eugenides, *The Virgin Suicides*, 243.

Indeed, romantic ruins guaranteed origins and promised authenticity, immediacy, and authority. However, there is a paradox. In the case of ruins that which is allegedly present and transparent whenever authenticity is claimed is present only as an absence; it is the imagined present of a past that can now only be grasped in its decay.⁵¹

The character of nostalgia in Eugenides' novel is analogical to Piranesi's paintings of the ruins in Huyssen's essay, not dismissing its importance but seeing the obsolescence of such desire. On the one hand, the novel is close in its ambiguity to Pynchon's works as it cannot find secure knowledge. And it also — indirectly and unsatisfying — comments on the state of postmodernist America. The narrative of the novel is a constant process, in which nostalgia is presented, played with and ultimately abandoned.

Because of the choice of its technique and its blindness to the life outside of the suburbs, *The Virgin Suicides* can be taken as overwhelming elitist and conservative. If this is criticism of the idealized American community then why are not the problems with prejudice and racism, poverty, and violence not in the centre of attention of *The Virgin Suicides*? Is this the root of the American malady? The decline of Detroit having the same reason as the decline of the modern America? Unfortunately, *The Virgin Suicides* does not deal with these questions. It only shows that there is a problem hidden deep in the society. There is some undefinable disease that has been living and growing amongst people for decades but it is difficult to identify and cure.

At the end of the novel, the reader is never assured why the girls killed themselves. Every attempt to explain the suicides fails. And in the end, it does not really matter. The truth is that the Lisbon sisters killed themselves tragically. To explain does not mean to return to life. But there is a huge difference between such an outcome and the characters of *The Virgin Suicides* who are driven by their insatiable desire to explain. It is clear from the novel that neither an outsider, nor an insider, can be, in principle, a reliable source of information. And yet, does the philosophical questioning of the truth overrides the psychological human desire for the stable truth? Can the decades of postmodernist ideology vanquish the desire of people for seeking the one and only truth? Suicide is an act that compels people to find causes and to ask what could have been done differently. The novel

⁵¹ Huyssen, "Nostalgia for Ruins", 12.

relies on the reader's longing for finite answers and challenges the reader to act. Without morality it appeals to their natural inquisition and asks them to cure the disease and find its causes. Unfortunately, without ultimate answers of what the causes are and how to cure them.

Chapter 3 American metamorphoses in *Middlesex*

3.1 Hermaphrodites in Greek mythology

In Greek mythology, Hermaphroditus is a double-sexed being, the son of Aphrodite and Hermes. As Ovid says in *Metamorphoses*, Hermaphroditus is born a man and is forced to merge with Salmacis the nymph. Hermaphroditus resists her advances, but she clings to him and prays to the gods to become one flesh with him. Her prayer is heard, and they become, rather violently, one body.¹ At one point of the story, Salmacis asks Hermaphroditus for “a sister’s kiss” and the sister’s kiss is where the story of Eugenides’ second novel, *Middlesex*, really begins.

At first they just hugged in the standard way, but after ten seconds the hug began to change; certain positions of the hands and strokings of the fingers weren’t the usual displays of sibling affection, and these things constituted a language of their own, announced a whole new message in the silent room.²

Unlike the myth of Hermaphroditus and Salmacis, the kisses and feelings between siblings Desdemona and Lefty are requited, but the result of their love is still the birth of a hermaphrodite; or to be more specific, the result is a conception of a mutated gene which manifests itself in the next generations and leads to the birth of the protagonist narrator of *Middlesex*, Calliope/Cal.³ Although this incestuous relationship is consensual, *Middlesex* is particular about describing this bond as close to the original sin that hangs over the family like a curse. Although not violent, the deed is still compared to the original act of Salmacis in *Metamorphoses* in terms of its gravity. The birth of Desdemona and Lefty’s baby is seen as a mistake after Desdemona learns of its possible deformations, and after the birth of their second child, Desdemona swears never to have children again. The siblings grow apart, but the “curse” is already passed on to the next generation and so, throughout the book, Desdemona keeps waiting for the curse to manifest itself. It is emphasized in the novel many times that the curse was caused by the original transgression which had dire consequences for the Stephanides

¹ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. Horace Gregory (New York: Viking Press, 1958), Book IV.

² Jeffrey Eugenides, *Middlesex* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002), 39.

³ In most cases I follow the narrator’s point of view in referring to the life of Calliope/Cal with masculine pronouns when describing the events after his transformation and with feminine pronouns when describing her childhood.

bloodline; and the connection between the Greek Hermaphroditus and Calliope/Cal is invoked numerous throughout the book.

Along with Hermaphroditus, it is also worth mentioning that there is a lesser-known hermaphrodite in the Greek Roman mythology. It is Agdistis, another double-sexed being referred to by the “she/her” pronoun. There are two major parallels between *Middlesex* and Agdistis’ story. According to Richard Buxton, “in myth, such an abnormal creature can never be born by chance but must originate through an irregular conception.”⁴ In *Middlesex*, that would be the incestuous relationship between Desdemona and Lefty. The second similarity is connected to Agdistis’ castration. Buxton describes that Agdistis’ body offended the divine order and had to be castrated because the gods feared her.⁵ In *Middlesex*, the fictional expert on hermaphroditism Peter Luce is a sort of god in the field of sexual disorders and gender identity. Luce suggests hormonal therapy and cosmetic surgery to transform the main character into an ordinary girl, technically by castrating her. Calliope refuses such a transformation and flees to San Francisco but feels judgment that comes with her unique predisposition. It is felt that she transgresses and disturbs the normal order of things. Calliope/Cal is then a modern amalgam of both Hermaphroditus and Agdistis.

In his adulthood, Cal acknowledges his heritage as a hermaphrodite but he also recognizes himself as the creature in the maze, Minotaur. Wondering about the possibility of disclosing his history to a woman he likes Cal announces that there is “no reason to mention my peculiarities, my wandering in the maze these many years, shut away from sight.”⁶ A whole chapter is devoted to Minotaurs. Entangled with Greek mythology, it describes the peculiar circumstances of the conceptions of Cal’s parents.

The Simultaneous Fertilization had occurred in the early morning hours of March 24, 1923, in separate, vertical bedrooms, after a night out at the theatre. My grandfather, not knowing he was soon to be fired, had splurged on four tickets to *The Minotaur*, playing at the Family.⁷

Minotaur is a source of lust and pleasure but it is lust forbidden and transgressive. Buxton compares two characters from Greek mythology, Europa and Pasiphae

⁴ Richard Buxton, *Forms of Astonishment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 220.

⁵ Buxton, *Forms of Astonishment*, 220.

⁶ Eugenides, *Middlesex*, 107.

⁷ Eugenides, *Middlesex*, 107.

and identifies Pasiphae's actions with transgression and Europa's with normality – Europa was tricked and taken by the god Zeus, but Pasiphae mated with the Cretan Bull willingly.

The fact that Pasiphae has transgressed is spelled out in the language of genealogy: her offspring is the hybrid Minotaur. Europa's act is quite different: Zeus' metamorphosis places their union within a sanctioning, normalizing framework, which is confirmed when Europa gives birth to the three unmonstrous heroes of Crete.⁸

The same can be said about Desdemona in *Middlesex*, her transgression is spelled out in the conception of a hermaphrodite and causes that Cal feels like a monster. As a result, Minotaurs and hermaphrodites are equalled with monstrosity and what is done in *Middlesex* is retelling the stories of Greek mythology focusing on the theme of transgressions. The same chapter describes the position of Cal in his adulthood:

I've never wanted to stay in one place. After I started living as a male, my mother and I moved away from Michigan and I've been moving ever since. In another year or two I'll leave Berlin, to be posted somewhere else. [...]. This once-divided city reminds me of myself. My struggle for unification, for *Einheit*. Coming from a city still cut in half by racial hatred, I feel hopeful here in Berlin.⁹

If the Brown University in *The Marriage Plot* is not the place for finding the ways for the future course of literature, then Detroit of *Middlesex* is not the place for people who do not fit the standards. On the other hand, Berlin is in sheer contrast with Detroit. It is the place of hope because it represents struggles for freedom and unification of different poles.

David Brauner in "Silence, Secrecy and Sexuality" mentions references to Greek mythology too, albeit concentrating on the figure of the seer Tiresias:

The terms in which Eugenides couches Cal's dual identity here implicitly invoke mythological figures – notably Tiresias, the blind prophet in Greek mythology, who was transformed into woman for seven years, whom Cal later plays in a high school production of *Antigone* and to whom he compares himself explicitly.¹⁰

As for the use of mythology, Brauner writes:

⁸ Buxton, *Forms of Astonishment*, 160.

⁹ Eugenides, *Middlesex*, 106.

¹⁰ David Brauner, "Silence, Secrecy and Sexuality: 'Alternate Histories' in Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres*, Carol Shields' *The Stone Diaries* and Jeffrey Eugenides' *Middlesex*," in *Contemporary American Fiction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 91.

If the Oedipus analogy tends to stigmatise and at the same time elevate Cal (Oedipus' sin makes him both a pariah and a seer of legendary wisdom), then the Ovidian model tends to normalise him, presenting his peculiar circumstances not as perverse deviancy but rather as a permutation of the evolutionary changes seen everywhere in nature.¹¹

However, there is no discourse of normalization possible in the novel's Detroit, because living in the city means identifying with one of the poles. It is required of Cal/Calliope to choose to be either a woman or a man. The space between these poles means deviancy and monstrosity.

3.2 The immigrant novel and other genres of *Middlesex*

When asked about his preference of realist writing rather than experimental engagement, Eugenides accentuated his devotion to realism accentuating cultural verisimilitude. He has stated many times his literary commitment to truth and realism, for instance in his interview with Jérémy Potier: "But no matter what I write, the imperative for me is to convince myself that the story I'm writing is true, that it happened, or could have happened, to feel credible, first to me and then, with luck and effort, to the reader."¹² According to the author, reality needs no embellishments: "The world we live in is as fantastical as anything I might dream up. I want to do it justice. I don't think reality is insufficient or needs a boost to be fascinating or worthy of examination."¹³ This reality is worth examining and writing about. Mainly, Eugenides' childhood and events he witnessed during his life often serve as a setting for his novels. And the same look back he accentuates in his views on literature:

The question is. How do you move the novel forward? For a long time, I was a card-carrying postmodernist. I thought the way to make something new was a question of form. I think you can see that with *The Virgin Suicides*. But now I don't think it's that simple. A lot of the so-called experiments people attempt today is not really new. People did them in the seventies already, or the twenties! People forget, or just don't know, and they do something they think is original, and it's not.¹⁴

¹¹ Brauner, "Silence, Secrecy and Sexuality", 94.

¹² Jeffrey Eugenides, "An Interview with Jeffrey Eugenides," interview by Jérémy Potier, *Transatlantica: Revue d'Études Américaines* 1 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.4000/transatlantica.155228>.

¹³ Eugenides, interview by Jérémy Potier.

¹⁴ Jeffrey Eugenides, "The Art of Fiction No. 215: Jeffrey Eugenides," interview by James Gibbons, *Paris Review* 199 (Winter 2011): 145.

So how does he imagine the novel will move forward? Here we come back to reconciliation of different poles of literature:

By a process of hybridization. By mixing the old and the new. By pushing ahead formally at times, but also in terms of sheer content. *Middlesex* is in some ways an old-fashioned novel. There are classical allusions and epic events. At the same time, the emotional content of the book—the realistic account of the life of an intersex person—is not traditional at all. The general mode of the book is postmodern, but the narrative movement is Aristotelian, and the sensibility, while comic, is anything but ironic.¹⁵

It would be simplifying to claim that originality is the sole aim of Eugenides' novels, and there is also more to the novels than a simple oscillation between realism, modernism and postmodernism. William Carlos Williams, Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, Henry James, William Faulkner, Saul Bellow but also John Hawkes and Rick Moody make appearance in Eugenides' inspirational portfolio.

There are many styles incorporated into *Middlesex* that are not restricted to mythology only. Mainly, it is Greek drama, an epos, an immigrant novel, a family saga but also a Bildungsroman in which the main hero/ine is not born, in a manner reminiscent of Tristram Shandy, until page 215. David Brauner mentions several intertextual allusions: The most obvious is perhaps the novel's connection to Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*, similarities between *Middlesex* and Rose Tremain's *Sacred Country* and Philip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint* from which the novel borrows a fictional citation from a medical paper with the diagnosis and classification of the main character's condition.¹⁶ That would be Peter Luce, the world's leading authority on hermaphroditism, who already appeared in Eugenides' short story "The Oracular Vulva".

The narrator of *Middlesex* is an aspiring writer who talks about his old dream of writing the next Greek Great Book:

That was when I was young and full of grand dreams. Now I've given up any hope of lasting fame or literary perfection. I don't care if I write a great book anymore, but just one which, whatever its flaws, will leave a record of my impossible life.¹⁷

¹⁵ Eugenides, interview by James Gibbons, 145.

¹⁶ Brauner, "Silence, Secrecy and Sexuality", 91.

¹⁷ Eugenides, *Middlesex*, 302.

The motif of recording is recurrent in all of Eugenides' novels, but here is the wish to record the life connected with abandoning the literary fathers and overcoming the anxiety of influence: "Even back then the Great Books were working on me, silently urging me to pursue the most futile human dream of all, the dream of writing a book worthy of joining their number."¹⁸ However, despite claiming to overcome his literary forefathers, Cal's indebtedness to the events of the past is still strong. A hundred pages further into the book he explains that he "hadn't gotten old enough yet to realize that living sends a person not into the future but back into the past, to childhood and before birth, finally, to commune with the dead. [...] In this life we grow backwards."¹⁹ It is possible to equal such an approach with the consequences of the collapse of the high-modernist ideology of style as envisioned by Fredric Jameson.

For with the collapse of the high-modernist ideology of style — what is as unique and unmistakable as your own fingerprints, as incomparable as your own body [...] — the producers of culture have nowhere to turn but to the past: the imitation of dead styles, speech through all the masks and voices stored up in the imaginary museum of a now global culture.²⁰

This can be also applied to Cal's hermaphroditism. As he sees no possibility of improvement in U.S. culture where his identity is connected with deviance he turns to the past.

The narrator of *Middlesex* travels in his narrative into the past, to the generations before him, to a different continent. *Middlesex* covers a story of three generations: Desdemona and Lefty, siblings who escape their home after the Turkish invasion and find their new homes in Detroit; Tessie and Milton who grow up in Detroit and move to its suburb of Grosse Pointe; and Tessie and Milton's children Calliope/Cal — the narrator of *Middlesex* — and Chapter Eleven.²¹ Desdemona and Lefty's story is the basis of all events happening in *Middlesex*. As stated previously, it is their incestuous relationship that is the sin behind the family curse. As Cal explains: "Parents are supposed to pass down

¹⁸ Eugenides, *Middlesex*, 302.

¹⁹ Eugenides, *Middlesex*, 425.

²⁰ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991): 17-18.

²¹ Chapter 11 is a form of bankruptcy proceeding. It is one of the first pieces of evidence given to the reader manifesting the interconnection of the Stephanides family and the American history.

physical traits to their children, but it's my belief that all sorts of other things get passed down, too: motifs, scenarios, even fates."²²

It is subtly suggested that in the village of their childhood, Bithynios, there were no eligible women for Lefty to choose, due to the epidemic of phylloxera blight and the Balkan Wars. The background Lefty and Desdemona come from is the land of cultural wars, as they are Greeks living in Turkey. Bithynios in Asia Minor is then in its character as a place of intercultural contact very similar to Detroit. As the narrator explains:

The Greek Army, encouraged by the Allied Nations, had invaded western Turkey in 1919, reclaiming the ancient Greek territory in Asia Minor. [...] It was now Greek troops who occupied Bursa. [...] For the first time in their lives the Greeks of Asia Minor were out from under Turkish rule.²³

In accordance with the curse which will take effect later in the story, the day after Lefty and Desdemona's first kiss, the Greek army begins to retreat from the Turkish territory burning everything in its path. The couple is forced to escape to Detroit through Smyrna — another multicultural city — in order to save their lives from the Turkish army. Their journey from Bithynios to Smyrna to Detroit and to Grosse Pointe is marked by the flight from intercultural wars which they can never quite escape, not even in the New World.

There are two complementary movements in the novel, growth and retreat, but there are also attempts at reinvention. The reinvention in *Middlesex* is very much a modernist process, similar to the process of reinvention and repetition in Stein's *Making of Americans*. The narrator describes this transition during the Dance of Isaiah, a fitting example of how reinvention works in *Middlesex*:

We Greeks get married in circles, to impress upon the essential matrimonial facts: that to be happy you have to find variety in repetition; that to go forward you have to come back where you began. Or, in my grandparents' case, the circling worked like this: as they paced around the deck the first time, Lefty and Desdemona were still brother and sister. The second time, they were bride and bridegroom. And the third, they were husband and wife.²⁴

²² Eugenides, *Middlesex*, 109.

²³ Eugenides, *Middlesex*, 21.

²⁴ Eugenides, *Middlesex*, 69.

Reinvention is based on repetition, and that is the movement of growth. But in *Middlesex* it is always accompanied by retreat.

That *Middlesex* is a Bildungsroman, a family saga and an epos is evident from the previous paragraphs but for identification of *Middlesex* as an immigrant novel some further theoretical grounding is needed. Some of the key aspects of the immigrant novel as highlighted by William Q. Boelhower can be spotted in the novel. The basic assumption of Boelhower is that in the immigrant novel, “an immigrant protagonist(s) representing an ethnic world view comes to America with great expectations and through a series of trials is led to reconsider them in terms of his final status.”²⁵ Boelhower writes about the tensions between the Old World and New World and idealization and de-idealization of both worlds connected with naivety and the immigrants’ ignorance of American life. He mentions several frames inherent to the immigrant novel, among these are the journey, folklore, practices and superstitions, religion and rituals of birth, marriage and death, speech, memory and the presence of objects from the old world.²⁶ Even though many of their cultural practices are dropped, one of the crucial rituals is seen during the funeral of Jimmy Zizmo, the husband of Desdemona and Lefty’s cousin Sourmelina. It is a simple ritual of guarding the door, so the soul of the dead does not re-enter the house but for Cal this has a more significant meaning. Cal repeats this ritual at the very end of the book, assuming his duty in his new male identity. It is crucial that Cal undergoes the ritual of guarding the door as it is something that can be only carried out by males.

In this respect, *Middlesex* is a prototypical immigrant novel which depicts the plights of immigrants through binaries and the ideal of hybridity. However, the concept of hybridity is like *Middlesex*, the family house in Grosse Pointe which is described as follows: “Middlesex! Did anybody live in a house as strange? As sci-fi? As futuristic and outdated at the same time? A house that was more like communism, better in theory than in reality?”²⁷ Hybridity is an idea that is great in theory, but when applied to practice, it does not live up to expectations, because it consists of features that do not fit together. It is not due to invalidity of

²⁵ William Q. Boelhower, “The Immigrant Novel as Genre,” *MELUS* 8, no. 11 (Spring 1981): 5.

²⁶ Boelhower, “The Immigrant Novel,” 7.

²⁷ Eugenides, *Middlesex*, 258.

such a concept, it is because of the architect who “did not believe in doors”²⁸ and so *Middlesex* was “a testament to theory uncompromised by practicality.”²⁹ Similarly, architects of the American experiment of multiculturalism in *Middlesex*, who experiment with the melting pot, are not able to achieve real hybridity.

3.3 Binaries and Hybridity

Middlesex is a literary hybrid as it combines several styles, and as such it can be for instance a modernist parody or a postmodernist pastiche. According to Fredric Jameson, “pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique, idiosyncratic style, the wearing of a linguistic mask, speech in a dead language. But it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without any of parody’s ulterior motives, amputated of the satiric impulse, devoid of laughter.”³⁰ That is exactly why *Middlesex* should be considered a parody, as it is an attempt at a formally hybrid novel with ulterior motives. Hybridization of genres may be presented as novelty here, but it is not a technique unknown to modernists and it was certainly a concept perfected by postmodernists. However, what is a more interesting question is how to make hybridization a viable concept after postmodernism; and what would it mean to write a hybrid novel in the 21st century. *Middlesex* is a call for reconsidering the status of hybridity in the American society and reassessing human relationships, especially between white and non-white Americans. As has been suggested before, because a direct call for sincerity can come across as moralizing, the novel uses parody and a narrative of multiple failed reinventions in order to achieve reconsideration.

Middlesex is full of metamorphoses, connected to different aspects of the Stephanides bloodline. The process of multiple reinventions is the central theme of the novel set into the opposing Greek and American cultures. What is Greek is likely to be reinvented as American. As the narrator comments, “a real Greek might end on this tragic note. But an American is inclined to stay upbeat.”³¹ As Desdemona and Lefty travel over the Atlantic and prepare themselves for a new

²⁸ Eugenides, *Middlesex*, 258.

²⁹ Eugenides, *Middlesex*, 258.

³⁰ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 17.

³¹ Eugenides, *Middlesex*, 511.

life and new identities, they reinvent themselves out of necessity, to enter the New World as a husband and wife and not as a brother and sister. As the narrator describes it: “Traveling made it easier. Sailing across the ocean among half a thousand perfect strangers conveyed an anonymity in which my grandparents could re-create themselves.”³² In addition, Desdemona enters the New World through a rite of passage. The concession at Ellis Island area is a liminal space for her. She carries with her a silkworm box, but silkworm eggs are symbolically disposed of as they are considered parasites. Her hair is also cut and with that act the first part of her reinvention is completed. She is reinvented as a wife to Lefty, but the two must still reinvent themselves as American citizens. It can be said that Lefty is the more successful of the two, always finding the means to provide for his family. Desdemona attempts to be shut away from the world around her. She is not interested in new inventions and lifestyles and the only innovation that interests her is a television.³³ However, as has been stated previously, *Middlesex* is a novel of two opposing movements — growth and retreat — and as such, the reinvention of the text is not definite.

In the end, the narratives collapse in on themselves. Lefty can be either a husband or a brother. At the moment of his death his memory reverts back to his childhood and to the days when Desdemona was his sister and nothing else. Desdemona can either be a devoted wife or a broken woman waiting to die. The members of the Stephanides family can be either Greeks adapting to American life or Americans with Greek roots. The novel always works with binaries which can shift from one pole to another but can never stay in the middle. Debra Shostak writes that:

Each figure Eugenides chooses falls short of the newly thinkable because each inevitably tumbles back into the binary. [...] The narrative of immigration and incest circles back around to Cal’s conception and birth – to the trope of the anomalous and unspeakable body that stands for the problem of hybridity. [...] Eugenides’ novel suggests that such a project is not easily realized within the lives of those who must occupy the space of difference, nor does it readily translate into the language of representation.³⁴

³² Eugenides, *Middlesex*, 68.

³³ This only attests to pervasiveness of television in American culture. Desdemona who successfully resists all influences of U.S. culture is not able to banish television. The absence of pop culture is evident in all three novels, but television always finds a way inside these strictly anti-pop culture spaces.

³⁴ Debra Shostak, “Theory Uncompromised by Practicality: Hybridity in Jeffrey Eugenides’ *Middlesex*, *Contemporary Literature* 49, no. 3 (2008): 388.

Shostak focuses on how the storyline keeps mirroring and echoing itself in many aspects. Calliope is born a girl with a rare genetic mutation, but chooses to reinvent herself as a man, Cal, in her teenage years. Cal's sexual identity is mirrored in the American vs. Greek identity of his parents and grandparents; and as Lefty and Desdemona have reinvented themselves as lovers, Calliope must reinvent herself as Cal, and Detroit (and the whole of America) must reinvent itself after the period of industrial decline and long-lasting race issues. But, despite participating in the male ritual of guarding the door so the soul cannot re-enter the house Cal never entirely eradicates his feminine part and upbringing in him and never becomes completely at home among male companions. As parts of the Greek heritage remain in the members of the Stephanides family, parts of Calliope remain in Cal. There is always either Calliope or Cal, the feminine or the masculine even though Cal/Calliope could choose to be neither or both. The characters and the setting never stop evolving, but they never stop devolving either. *Middlesex* establishes identities and deconstructs them so that the identities remain shifting, impossible to pin down. But it is always movement between binaries. And the binaries of *Middlesex* also relate to politics. The 1967 Detroit riots addressed in *Middlesex* are often presented in history as either the Detroit Riots or the Detroit Rebellion. For instance, Joe T. Darden and Richard W. Thomas describe this difference in terminology from two different perspectives, from the "white perspective" the riot meant disruption of a comfortable lifestyle resulting in fleeing their "fabulous neighborhood", and from the perspective of a black teenage male it meant fear for his life while being caught between the rioters and the white police.³⁵ These are two terms that are impossible to reconcile, offering nothing of the unintentional hybridization about which Bakhtin notes that it

remains mute and opaque, never making use of conscious contrasts and oppositions. [Yet] such unconscious hybrids have been at the same time profoundly productive historically: they are pregnant with potential for new world views, with new "internal forms" for perceiving the world.³⁶

³⁵Joe T. Darden and Richard W. Thomas, *Detroit: Race Riots, Racial Conflicts, and Efforts to Bridge the Racial Divide* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2013), 2.

³⁶ Mikhail Bakhtin, "Discourse in the novel," in *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 360.

3.4 Reappearance of the American disease

It has been established that there is a hidden threat dormant in the genetic line of the Stephanideses in *Middlesex*. And as the narrator recounts the history of the Stephanides family, Detroit goes through prohibition, the Great Depression, World War II, Detroit Riots and the white flight. All these events are always connected to the Stephanides family. Prohibition enables Lefty to run a speakeasy and during the Depression he makes money selling erotic photography. Milton can claim insurance money after the riots destroy his unprofitable restaurant, move to the suburbs and start a new business. The personal history and the national history are closely intertwined. When Lefty and Desdemona kiss for this first time, the Greek army begins to retreat. And as Calliope grows up, Detroit changes. It seems that the further the “curse” progresses, the further the decline of Detroit moves. And similarly as in *The Virgin Suicides* there is some unspoken disease in the American society.

In *Middlesex* this disease is more vibrant, and it achieves increasingly clear contours. The disease in *Middlesex* is firmly entrenched in the American history and is linked to Detroit and its decline. The main parts of *Middlesex* take place in Detroit or in its suburb of Grosse Point, in the same suburb as *The Virgin Suicides*. However, where Grosse Point of *The Virgin Suicides* is bland and unspecific, in *Middlesex* it is loud, well-defined and even accusatory. The narrator explains:

Grow up in Detroit and you understand the way of all things. Early on, you are put on close relations with entropy. As we rose out of the highway trough, we could see the condemned houses, many burned, as well as the stark beauty of all the vacant lots, gray and frozen.”³⁷

This is a very different depiction of the suburbs from that of *The Virgin Suicides* which placed the societal decay far away from their suburbs. *Middlesex* takes the direct approach of dismantling the idyllic dream of living in the suburbs. Attempting to buy their new house in Grosse Pointe, Milton reveals the process behind the idea of an idyllic neighbourhood called the Point System, which should ensure that the houses are sold to “the right people.” Kenneth Millard writes about *The Virgin Suicides* that

³⁷ Eugenides, *Middlesex*, 517.

it is perhaps revealingly American that something as historically recent as the decline of the American that auto industry can be regarded in a contemporary novel as a kind of Old World atrophy, and that its response to this development is not renovation but abandonment. Here again the adolescence of the Lisbon girls acquires a national significance, because it is as if the youthful energy of American life must always seek out new opportunities and horizons, and its native restlessness must not be inhibited. [...] The American answer to a project in serious decline is to flee, to escape, and to begin again elsewhere.³⁸

This is very much telling of *Middlesex* too, but in comparison with *The Virgin Suicides*, *Middlesex* advocates the idea of reinvention, not abandonment, of incorporating the old parts into a new whole, be it a cultural or personal identity. A person can change to a certain extent, the economy can shift: “All over Detroit in 1944, automobile factories have ben retooled. At Willow Run, B-24s roll off the assembly line instead of Ford sedans. Over at Chrysler, they’re making tanks. The industrialists have finally found a cure for the stalled economy: war.”³⁹ But the reinvention comes at a cost. Debra Shostak writes that

Eugenides’ attachment in *Middlesex* to the various metaphors I have noted—hybridity, doubleness, the middle, betweenness—indicates his intuition of the need to devise figures of the newly thinkable with which to rescue the hermaphrodite from the position of the strange.⁴⁰

There is a definite need for devising the newly thinkable, but *Middlesex* does not quite achieve it. The novel shows either binaries or eradication as is shown in the funny, absurd and tragic scene of the Ford English School melting pot:

Inside the cauldron, men are packed together, throwing off immigrant costumes, putting on suits. Limbs are tangling up, feet stepping on feet. Lefty says ‘Pardon me, excuse me,’ feeling thoroughly American as he pulls on his blue wool trousers and jacket. In his mouth: thirty-two teeth brushed in the American manner. His underarms: liberally sprinkled with American deodorant. Ad now spoons are descending from above, men are churning around and around...⁴¹

This scene is a strange combination of a celebration and a danse macabre. The melting pot, the very idea of idealized hybridity is in fact a strange mixture of

³⁸ Kenneth Millard, *Coming of Age in Contemporary American Fiction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007): 81-82.

³⁹ Eugenides, *Middlesex*, 169.

⁴⁰ Shostak, “Theory”, 391.

⁴¹ Eugenides, *Middlesex*, 104.

what should be understood as the civilized American life — a combination of the English language and commodities such as soaps, toothbrushes and deodorants.

There are many opportunities for reinvention in the novel and many binaries as well, but no hybridity. It cannot be found in the melting pot. It cannot be found in Calliope/Cal, nor in other characters. Yanoula Athanassakis points out that

The ostensible parameters of Cal's body contain an intersection of multiple cultural experiences, varying performances of genders and an exploration of ethnic American subjectivity that denies traditional forms of essentialism; by virtue of its denial, *Middlesex* asks its audience to deconstruct and reconsider the ways in which ethnic American identity operates in a globalized and hybridized US landscape.⁴²

While *Middlesex* is a call for hybridity and hybrid thinking with its hybrid format, at the same time it shows that hybridity is for the characters of *Middlesex* a largely illusional concept as there are only binaries. That unspoken disease in *Middlesex* seems to be connected to the impossibility of reconciling many worldviews, mainly racial and ethnical. It is a disease that could be cured by hybridity if there was any viable hybridity accessible. The American nation needs to be reinvented; it needs to overcome the criminal and moral guilt of those who committed crimes against the African-Americans and immigrants, political guilt of choosing bad leaders, and metaphysical guilt which lies in the fact that Americans could not prevent injustice happening to non-white Americans. But it is not easy to do this in the city so scarred by racial conflicts, as is Detroit. There is no possibility of reinvention in *Middlesex*; there is no reinvention in repetition. On the contrary, repetition is undesirable but unfortunately very real in the American society. It suffices to mention the death of George Floyd in May 2020 and protests that followed.

Merton Lee analyses the novel from the perspective of ethnic assimilation and heteronormativity and concludes that ethnocentrism is critiqued by irony and parody, but as for the question of homosexuality, the text is unsatisfactory and shows the impasse of sexuality and gender, affirming heterosexuality.⁴³

⁴² Yanoula Athanassakis, "'The American girl I had once been': Psychosomatic trauma and history in Jeffrey Eugenides' *Middlesex*," *European Journal of American Culture* 30, no. 3 (2011): 229.

⁴³ Merton Lee, "Why Jeffrey Eugenides' *Middlesex* Is So Inoffensive," *Critique* 51, no.1 (2010): 32.

(It) comes down to the place of narrative closure, since to close the book with Cal as a stable, happy, heterosexual male is to enact the neutering of the queer that Halberstam says is so comforting to a conservative ideology. It is true that throughout the novel, the underlying ambiguities always threaten to irrupt through the conciliatory surface, but the fact that these undercurrents are invisible, and by definition below the surface, serves to preserve the inoffensive hierarchy of a queer coming of age in which the teleological destination, and what is most desired, is normalcy.⁴⁴

That is one perspective how to understand the novel's conservatism. The second perspective relates to binaries that designate one's identity. The absence of hybridity, ethnical or gender leads to the situation when individual identities become radicalized, similarly as in contemporary identity politics. And the fact that there are no binaries makes a political or social change impossible. On the contrary, as there is no available space for encounter between the groups, the groups that are identified and labelled as "white men," "LGBT," "feminists," or "transgender" drift further apart. Such a movement prevents any effective cure to that disease causing the decline of American society. *Middlesex* was published in 2002 but this topic can resonate in contemporary society even stronger than twenty years ago.

⁴⁴ Lee, "Middlesex is So Inoffensive," 45.

Conclusion

Jeffrey Eugenides revealed the moment when he decided to become a writer in an interview with James Gibbons. It was at high school; when reading *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, he identified himself with Stephen Dedalus: “Like me, he was bookish, good at academics, and possessed an ‘absurd name, an ancient Greek’.”¹ Jeffrey Eugenides may not be a character in Joyce’s novel, but Mr. Eugenides, the Smyrna merchant, is a character in T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*. Smyrna plays a central role in *Middlesex* where the narrator “would like to resuscitate – for purely elegiac reasons and only for a paragraph – that city which disappeared, once and for all, in 1922”²; the narrator then continues the relevant passage of *The Waste Land* as follows:

Mr. Eugenides, the Smyrna merchant
Unshaven, with a pocketful of currants
C.i.f. London: documents at sight,
Asked me in demotic French
To luncheon at the Cannon Street Hotel
Followed by a weekend at the Metropole.³

In the context of the novel, it is possible to compare two cities: the lost city of Smyrna, the city of Mr. Eugenides, the Smyrna merchant; and the city of declining Detroit which plays an important role not only in *Middlesex*, but also in *The Virgin Suicides*. Admitting his fascination with Alexis de Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America*, Eugenides claimed that he “knew something strange was going on in the country and [...] wanted to counterpose that to what the country had wanted to be and in a certain case was in its beginnings. [...] Now it seems to me that story is even more relevant because we’re in an even worse state and further from any sort of ideal.”⁴ The reason for the resurrection of Detroit in these two novels is not for elegiac purposes only. The biggest challenge in resuscitating the declining city is to find the roots of problems that prevent Detroit and its people from thriving.

¹ Jeffrey Eugenides, “The Art of Fiction No. 215: Jeffrey Eugenides,” interview by James Gibbons, *Paris Review* 199 (Winter 2011): 127.

² Eugenides, *Middlesex*, 50.

³ T.S. Eliot, “The Waste Land,” in *The Waste Land*, ed. Michal North (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001), 12.

⁴ Eugenides, interview by Hermione Hoby.

This strange elusive disease that is present in the country achieves first contours in *The Virgin Suicides* where Grosse Point is deliberately hidden behind a veil of nostalgia. Nostalgia in the novel is eventually dismantled, but the disease does not disappear. After the suicides, the suburbs continue to deteriorate, trees are cut down and people move away. There is no alternative future. The future is declined. There is nothing to counteract entropy that has been growing in Detroit since the decline of its automobile industry. Longing for utopia is strong in the novel as is the narrators' desire for definite answers, but such a world in which everything can be explained, and every problem can be traced to its roots is long gone. It disappeared with the end of positivism.

As for the concept of conservation of the community in *The Virgin Suicides*, it is not preservation that is a pivotal technique of the novel. There is no attempt of recording the past for the purposes of preservation. What seems to be central in *The Virgin Suicides* is reworking of history in such a way that allows the reader to doubt and question and also to scrutinize the official national narrative. At the end of *The Virgin Suicides* there is only one certainty — five girls in otherwise ostensibly idyllic suburbs are dead — and the reader is left to deal with the heritage of the post-positivist world and called upon to find the cure for the diseased society. The reader is in the end alone, caught between the impossibility of deciphering life, death, and the infinite human desire to explain.

In *Middlesex*, the decline of Detroit is depicted with all its repercussions — poverty, unemployment, racial and ethnic tensions, attempts at eradication of different cultures and favouritism toward the white majority. *Middlesex* explores — using Greek mythology and a variety of other genres — the limits of hybridity and binaries and rather than pushing the idea of hybridity it shows its failings in racially, ethnically and ideologically divided Detroit. And not only does hybridity fail practically, what could be hybrid is depicted as monstrosity and a result of transgression. That is evident in the feelings of the novel's main character, Cal/Calliope, whose birth is a result of “the original sin” committed by an incestuous relationship between his/her grandparents. A sin that has cursed the Stephanides bloodline and that progresses as Detroit declines. The disease which resurfaces here is still rather abstract, but it becomes clear that its roots are found in interracial and interethnic relationships of Americans.

The Marriage Plot is the novel furthest removed from the American malady but closest to New Sincerity through the character of Leonard, a fictional counterpart of David Foster Wallace. *The Marriage Plot* stages an artistic battle between the two authors. Madeleine, the main character of the novel, is treated as the ideal reader and realist who is to judge which of the authors is the more deserving one, but her approach to the literary tradition and her inclination for rigidity and susceptibility to misconceptions, especially regarding deconstruction, disqualify her as an ideal reader. While *the Marriage Plot* shows great indebtedness to the texts of David Foster Wallace, in the novel Wallace is surpassed as a lover, but not necessarily as the author, since he gets removed from the novel. However, the search for a new course of literature after postmodernism and the heritage of semiotics and deconstruction is unresolved as the novel does not present any satisfactory future direction. In *The Marriage Plot* the search for the cure of the American society is present but more in the form of regaining the forgotten American fame. It is not a major concern of the novel; it is a mere afterthought.

Each novel, then, introduces a concept which it eventually disqualifies: *The Virgin Suicides* focuses on nostalgia, *Middlesex* presents and dismantles hybridity, and *The Marriage Plot* works with a certain type of literary determinism. Each novel presents space, not so much for rethinking the events of the past, as for creating a challenge for the future. This is something Wallace touches upon in "This is Water," how calls for sincerity can come across as moralizing. It is one of the paradoxes of the New Sincerity movement to call for a change while admitting that such a call can be mistaken for common moralization. New Sincerity is trying to find ways how to erase that barricade, not to dismiss the idea as hypocritical but to find a workaround, as moralising delivered directly will always sound pretentious. Eugenides is not part of the fraudulent paradox, but he is not anxious about his image as an author either, at least not in the way presented for instance in Wallace's "Octet". His texts share the same mission, to call for a change while trying to find a method of connecting with the reader, and demand a change in thinking while crossing the barrier of rejection, which is also quite clearly the heritage of postmodern irony. His mode of writing is still connected to grand narratives from which it is desirable to draw a lesson and to think about the now.

These narratives criticize the ubiquitous irony of postmodern culture simply by ignoring it.

Regarding Eugenides' affiliation with New Sincerity, in terms of his relationships with the reader, his narratives are meant to speak to individuals. Eugenides stated that: "I think about the reader. I care about the reader. Not 'audience.' Not 'readership.' Just the reader. That one person, alone in a room, whose time I'm asking for."⁵ And in a different interview he added that: "I'm more and more interested in clarity and thoughtfulness in fiction, rather than in spectacle or gimmickry. Just a voice that's companionable and speaking to you on some reassuring level."⁶ However, no matter how similar the aims of this author and New Sincerity are, there are some issues with Eugenides' sincerity. There is, for instance, that moment of checking future actions against previous behaviour, as Martin Paul Eve has suggested in connection with the text's sincerity. The aim of sincerity is not to be accurate but to be consistent. If *The Marriage Plot* features a character undoubtedly indebted to David Foster Wallace and such a connection is later denied by the author, the foundations of sincerity are shaken. But there are even more pressuring issues.

Rather than a reassuring friendly voice that speaks to the reader, what is felt in the novels is an underlying, hidden voice that accounts for the unspoken agenda — a call for reconstructing the American golden age and finding a necessary remedy — without explaining what remedy and kind of future is required. The novels do indeed form the "uncreated conscience of the race" born from the writer's alertness to life. But their method is a one-way pleading, not a two-way conversation. If it is possible to create a literary space of availability in fiction then Eugenides' novels fail to create such a space. Even though Eugenides and New Sincerity have similar methods and concerns, the reader of Eugenides' novels is ultimately always left alone. The reader works through the irony of the novels, through their metafiction, ambiguity and misconceptions but eventually and inevitably is left alone, not as an object of moralism, but as a person responsible for the fate of their reading, their life, and finally the world at large.

⁵ Eugenides, interview by James Gibbons, 148.

⁶ Jeffrey Eugenides, "Jeffrey Eugenides: 'I'm not trying to compete with the outrageousness of Trump,'" interview by Hermione Hoby, *The Guardian*, November 25, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/nov/25/jeffrey-eugenides-interview>.

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