

NATIONAL IDENTITY REFLECTED IN JEFFREY EUGENIDES' NOVELS

Miruna Ciocoi-Pop

Assist., PhD Student, "Vasile Goldiș" Western University of Arad

Abstract: Ian McEwan's novels reflect the diverse facets of national identity, especially due to the fact that he himself has been confronted with the struggle of creating an identity and the struggle of being an "ethnic" in the United States of America. The present paper will focus on the diverse instances of national identity as reflected in Jeffrey Eugenides' main novels.

Key-words: identity, ethnic, ethic, literature, self-portrayal

The recent political events in Europe that sprung from the waves of migration have given new meaning to the term *national identity*. It is clear at this point that national identity can no longer be considered a political, social, or ideological element; it is a matter of cultural existence. Matters such as national identity, ethnic and national phenomena are analyzed more frequently than ever both by the academic and the politic community. Lately, the study of multiethnic states and identities has become a topic of interest around the world. The present paper will focus on the way in which Jeffrey Eugenides shed light on the significance of national identity in his novels, long before the subject became of broad interest. What is more, his best known novels are almost always centered on such topics as inner exile, the search of identity or self-portrayal, thus we believe his novels to be a good starting point in analyzing the concept of national identity reflected in literature.

Jeffrey Eugenides is an American writer of mixed origin, Greek and Irish, who was born in Detroit, Michigan and who can be easily considered an author of the exile whose work is based

significantly on the subject of national identity. This is true especially from the perspective of the feelings of isolation and spiritual loneliness that are identifiable in his novels. In an interview for the Paris Review Eugenides said the following:

We read *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* that year, and it had a big effect on me, for reasons that seem quite amusing to me now. I'm half Irish and half Greek—my mother's family were Kentuckians, Southern hillbillies, and my paternal grandparents immigrants from Asia Minor—and, for that reason, I identified with Stephen Dedalus. Like me, he was bookish, good at academics, and possessed an “absurd name, an ancient Greek.” Joyce writes somewhere that Dedalus sees his name as an omen of his destiny, and I, at the dreamy age of sixteen, did as well. *Eugenides* was in *The Waste Land*. My Latin teacher pointed that out to me. The only reason I was given to these fantasies in the first place, of course, was that the power of Joyce's language and the story of Stephen Dedalus refusing to become a priest in order to take up the mantle of art were so compelling to me. Dedalus 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 to promise maximum alertness to life. It seemed holy to me, and almost religious. (Gibson, “Jeffrey Eugenides, The Art of Fiction”)

Even though he is born in America, the author seems to always have swayed between different cultures and “Heimatlands”. He studied in America, then spent time in India as a volunteer for Mother Teresa before moving to Germany. In 2007 he moved back to the United States where he taught writing at Princeton. Alongside his geographical periplex, we can observe a literary recurrence of multiculturalism as a literary theme in his novels: the literary characters that he created are often immigrants or social outcasts, individuals lost in the tediousness of the modern space and time, spiritual exiles. A historic event that coincides with Eugenides' childhood that coincides with his condition of exile and that influenced his national identity. Born in Detroit in the 60's, the writer witnessed the decline and the spiritual death of the town as a result of the street riots from 1967. The feelings of instability, of the ephemeral will haunt him throughout his entire existence:

When I was born, Detroit was the fourth-largest city in the country. The population stood at more than a million people. But people were already beginning to flee, and in 1967, when the riots occurred, the trickle turned into a flood. My 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. (Gibson, "Jeffrey Eugenides, *The Art of Fiction*")

The insight that all life is ephemeral encapsulates the author within a material illusion, somewhere beyond the borders of time and space. Here is where we draw the first parallel to his novels and the way in which they reflect the idea of national identity: in *The Virgin Suicides*, the narrative chorus seems located somewhere outside time and space. This special and temporal isolation reflected in the novel also through the desperate situation of the main characters, locked and granted no access to the real world, is the same type of metaphorical exile that the author himself went through in his acknowledgement and acceptance of his national identity. The atmosphere of ruin and decadence in *The Virgin Suicides* (shut down factories, chopped down trees) is closely connected to the author's own experience as a child, to his feeling of being an exile on grounds of his nationality, of being condemned to live in a town adrift, of being abandoned and not able to identify with neither the nationality that he was born with (Greek) nor the one he pertained to (American). The lack of belonging to a well defined group, both from the point of view of nationality and of inner existence, is also to be observed in his novel *Middlesex*, where the narrative perspective is both feminine and masculine, a world seen through the eyes of Cal, born a hermaphrodite: "(...) people often ask me why I chose to narrate a novel from the point of view of an intersex person, and my answer is, every novel should be narrated by an intersex person. The job of the novelist is to inhabit both male and female characters, so in a sense every novelist should possess a hermaphroditic imagination." (Ibidem)

Another indicator of the feeling of unbelonging and exclusion is social class, a subject dealt with by the author indirectly, but tactful and delicately. When the main character in *Middlesex*, Calliope, is enrolled in a private school, she feels excluded and marginalized. Similarly, in *The Marriage Plot*, Mitchell feels exiled, alone, alienated during his visit at Madeleine's home, being exposed to a world completely opposite to his, presided by Madeleine's authoritarian father, the university professor. Eugenides often writes about privileged social classes from the perspective of the outsider, the observer who is never part of the world that he portrays. This is also a form of non-belonging, of not identifying with the surrounding society

and world. The spiritual and social exclusion portrayed in Eugenide's novels is also based on autobiographical elements. In his childhood, Eugenides has been exposed to the sensitive subject of class differentiation, reflected in Calliope's situation at the private school, and this experienced affected and marked the author. These biographical details about Eugenides' early childhood and school years are important in order to clarify the reasons why the subject of identity is recurrent in his major novels. Private school was the medium where he first connected with children from upper class families and in their presence, according to Eugenides himself in several interviews, he became aware of his status and of the material and class differences that set him apart from his fellow students. It was in this context that he became aware of his curly hair and aquiline nose. As a Greek he was considered an "ethnic" – a term that Eugenides did not like at all – in the end, who is not ethnic to some extent? The only feeling of superiority towards these rich children was the fact that he learned better: Ian McEwan just wrote me about the new book and said, 'People say there's not a class system in America. Now I know there is, and I can tell them what to read if they don't know.' I didn't know *The Marriage Plot* was that much about the class system, but I guess it is." (Ibidem)

In various moments Jeffrey Eugenides said that, in his vision, every individual is radically different from the other ones, and forms an independent micro-universe. This is far from being a cliché; it is the idea that all humans are at some point in search of their own identity. The quest of identity nowadays, in the new political context, is a quest for national or, dare I say, international identity, brought about by new social and historical contexts and by the new dimensions of migration as a real and changing phenomenon. In the introduction to his book on national identity, bearing the same name, Anthony D. Smith claims that: "Nationalism provides perhaps the most compelling identity myth in the modern world, but it comes in various forms. Myths of national identity typically refer to territory or ancestry as the basis of political community, and these differences furnish important, if often neglected, sources of instability and conflict in many parts of the world" (Smith, 8). In other words, national identity is not necessarily correlated to politics, to a geographical territory or even to ancestry.

Definitions of national identity have changed throughout the centuries and are still changing with the new political occurrences. But literature, being one of the most profound

mediums of human expression, offers insight as to how identity is perceived, how for some writers, like Jeffrey Eugenides, it is indeed a matter of nationality and how national identity can equal to inner and outer isolation and exile. Jeffrey Eugenides is all the more so suitable for this topic as he has lived and known what national identity and its definition are as a true life experience and has reflected and portrayed it in his novels, through the different instances of self-search and identity issues that his literary characters underwent. Be it gender differentiation or ethnicity, Jeffrey Eugenides encompasses the universality of national identity and identity definition in his major novel, and offers a cohesive view on national identity.

Bibliografie

1. Smith, Anthony. *National Identity*. Las Vegas: University of Nevada Press, 1991.
2. Gibbson, James. "Jeffrey Eugenides, The Art of Fiction No.215". *The Paris Review* No. 199, Winter 2011. Available at <http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/6117/the-art-of-fiction-no-215-jeffrey-eugenides>
3. Dandel, Richard. *A Literary View of the Genesis and Metamorphosis of the Self*. Jeffrey Eugenides – A Case Study. Editura Universității "Lucian Blaga" din Sibiu: 2006
4. Newsnight Review. *Middlesex by Jeffrey Eugenides*. BBC News 9 Oct 2002. <http://www.news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/newsnight/review>