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Colm Tóibín as Critic

Maurice Fitzpatrick

The life and work of Colm Tóibín prompts many questions: how did he emerge from his school unscathed? How does he write with such cosmopolitan ease in Irish newspapers marked by internecine quarrels? How does he retain his own voice traditional voice, mixed with modern ideas, in this climate of revisionist-historian sneering? How does his work help to define Ireland in the 21st century, given the enormous changes that have taken place in the past fifteen years? Finally, how did he make the transition from being a bohemian in Barcelona, bearded like a mujahedin, to his new life on the jet-set of literary talks, seminars and current affairs debates?

To answer these questions, which form the basis of my paper, I will examine Tóibín's generation. Colm Tóibín was born in Enniscorthy, Co. Wexford in 1955. He is the son of a local historian and he went to school locally, entering a boarding school for two years before going to University College Dublin (UCD) where he studied English and History.

Although only one hundred kilometers up the east coast of Ireland, Dublin seems to have been a liberation for Tóibín. He met writers of the day, including Francis Stuart. His reading at UCD was unconventional. He read Hemingway, Camus and Sartre; he watched Bergman films about which he has written: "The impact of stumbling into *Cries and Whispers* as a young

student was devastating. Bergman is in everything I do”.¹

Straight after his degree he went to Barcelona to teach English. About this period of his life, Tóibín has said: “I learned two languages badly, Spanish and Catalan, read, got drunk every night I could. It was great — drugs, sex and rock’n’roll, only I was no good at drugs and didn’t like rock’n’rock. After three years I came home, educated.”²

It can also be said that he came home bristling with ideas, having seen the fall of General Franco in Spain and witnessed the society become free once more. These observations are contained in his *Homage to Barcelona* (1990). This book is a generous mix of anecdote, history and a paean to the spirit of the Catalans.

Upon his return to Dublin, he became part of a fabled generation of journalists who wrote for *Magill*, a fringe intellectual magazine during the shifty reign of Charles Haughey.

A book by John Waters, *Jivin’ at the Crossroads*, encapsulates where Tóibín stood among his peers at that time. He exuded an aura of worldliness. Waters, who was born in the same year as Tóibín, had spent his youth driving a Hiace van around the back lanes of Co. Roscommon, delivering newspapers. Waters, by then a fellow journalist, recalls being in pubs frequented by Dublin journalists such as Doheny & Nesbitts. Tóibín would entertain the group of journalists by telling them such things as ‘John is up from the country. John has never been to University. Sometimes John feels afraid’. Tóibín’s warm, gently mocking tone masks a toughness and resilience. He was, by then, well on his way to finding his own voice as a story-teller. Tóibín stood out among his peers. Journalism for him was a means to an end. Of this time in his life he has said: “Journalism got the poison out of me, over issues that bother me — the IRA, intellectual nationalism, the Church, conservative, soft-spoken government. I didn’t need to put the

anger into novels”.³

Tóibín is a freshly cosmopolitan voice in Irish writing. Although Ireland has opened its mind to new influences, even in my short lifetime, there is something of a facade in the image of new Ireland. The *nouveau* cafes and plastic décor lack depth of perspective. Toibin has a long-standing interest in writers — the range worth noting — as diverse as Jorge Luis Borges, James Baldwin, Francis Stuart and Truman Capote. Tóibín has moved through his subjects thematically, irrespective of epochal or national categories that academics tend to draw. Maybe Tóibín would shudder at the comparison, but there is a similarity between the path of Conor Cruise O’Brien’s life as a writer, spent foraging through topics with certain dominant themes that interested him, and Tóibín’s trajectory as a writer. In *The Great Melody*, O’Brien describes, in the Preface, how put-upon he was with the writing of his book. He had amassed all his material but was, for years, unable to write the biography. Then O’Brien hit upon a method — to write his book thematically. This is something that Tóibín’s criticism does too. Tóibín works through other writers to explore and understand themes that interest him like sexuality, loneliness and evil.

To enable his thematic way of working, Tóibín is a frequent contributor to The New York Times Review of Books and The London Review of Books. I will dwell on much of his writing in these periodicals as a key to understanding his broader interests, his criticism, and some of the moral debates Tóibín has become involved in over the past decade in Ireland.

Tóibín is not one of the revisionist camp. That said, it is easy to see why, with titles like *New Ways to Kill Your Father*, he might be thought of as such. Tóibín advocates a constant moving away from any orthodoxy that has grown from old fusty ideas. That is why his criticism is marked by a concern for the power of the individual to make differences. For instance, he main-

tained that Joyce's Dublin characters did not have their destinies shaped by such external forces as Irish history or the Land Wars. Their suffering comes from inside.

Tóibín takes Sartre's notion of being damned to be free a step further. We are damned to be free, to wallow in our own thoughts and joys and sorrows and *because of that* life is endlessly fascinating. In Ireland today, there are orthodoxies as strong as any that existed in the past. If historians and social commentators wished to liberate by smashing the idols of the past, they would have done better than to establish idols in their place.

A moving away from time-honoured beliefs incurs a certain amount of resentment. Tóibín, by spending so much time outside of Ireland, seems to have concurred with James Joyce who thought that "the shortest way to Tara [is] via Hollyhead".⁴

Another consequence of engaging in criticism against new trends is that one's thoughts are sometimes made to become political acts. An example of writing and writers becoming political was the 1997 controversy surrounding Francis Stuart. He had been appointed to the board of Aosdana. (Aosdana is a body of 120 government-sponsored artists in Ireland) in 1981. Stuart became one of the five *Saoi* (wise person) of Aosdana in 1996. Suffice it to say there was a division within Aosdana that believed Stuart to have been a fascist sympathiser during WWII when he was a broadcaster on German radio. Another faction within Aosdana believed the accusations against Stuart's collaboration to be contrived and they sought to give him the recognition he deserved for his contribution to Irish letters. This schism within Aosdana caused resignations.

Tóibín was an advocate of Stuart because he believed that Stuart had had the courage to express, after the fall of that awful regime, his own ambivalence and confusion. Tóibín wrote:

“I cannot accept that writers should be good people. I believe that part of the purpose of writing is to speak for the damned and I can hardly object when a novelist takes this seriously enough (or is led to by other motives) to place himself outside the pale of the saved, no matter how much I might disapprove of his actions and disagree with his politics. I wish that after the war others who had collaborated or expressed anti-semitic views had also written novels which explored, or even refused to recognise, their own foolishness and badness. I wish the business of evil were explored more deeply and more seriously in fiction. Thus I cannot complain when Francis Stuart is honoured by his fellow artists. It is not a simple matter; it does not come to us pure. But I cannot regret voting for him”.⁵

Tóibín is quoted earlier as saying that “Bergman is in everything I do”. Bergman is certainly in the above passage which are the props and stays of Tóibín’s own art. It is his mission statement. In the film, *Cries and Whispers*, which had such an unsettling effect on the youthful Tóibín, the writer/director takes pains to expose the lies and deceit of two characters, sisters, who cannot love each other. In juxtaposition, there are two women depicted in the film who love each other and behave charitably towards each other.

Tóibín edges towards a holistic treatment of people in art — above all, he seeks to bring into focus the unpalatable elements of humanity that many would sooner brush aside. Even in one of his most documented and researched novels, *The Master*, Tóibín begins with a dream sequence. The oneiric is the most anarchic of all states of mind: nothing is debarred. When Tóibín wants to dig beneath what exists on record about an historical personage, he imagines the dream life: “Sometimes at night he dreamed about the dead — familiar faces and others, half-forgotten ones, fleetingly

summoned up”.⁶

It is no accident that Tóibín begins his most mature work to date with a motif apparent in the film he saw back in his student days. Bergman achieved his highest cinematic aims through inference — a face or a movement was an attempt at illuminating the dark spaces of the mind. In his notes for *Cries and Whispers* he wrote: “I believe that the film consists of this poem: A human being dies but, as in a nightmare, gets stuck half-way through and pleads for tenderness, deliverance, something”.⁷

We can see that Tóibín is drawn to the more shadowy aspects of our consciousness; and he uses these aspects to illuminate the exteriority of life. His stance on Francis Stuart reflects this. While some Irish writers and journalists wanted to keep the matter political, Tóibín insisted that it was a question first and foremost of artistic freedom.

Not that all these black thoughts preclude some black humour. Tóibín recently edited a book of essays on J. M. Synge entitled ‘*New Ways to Kill Your Father*’. Anthony Cronin, a fellow Wexfordman, contributed to this book. (Incidentally, John Banville also hails from Wexford. There must be a writing gene in the sunny south-east).

If Tóibín is in two minds about a range of issues in Ireland’s past, he is also, or was until recently, divided on the issue of sexual scandals in the Church. In a brilliant essay, published in December 2005, about his old boarding school, St Peter’s in Wexford, he illuminated exactly how he felt about the power system the Church has evolved from the past up to the present.

St. Peter’s has the unenviable reputation of topping the league of paedophile scandals in Irish schools. Many of the most infamous names in Irish public life — Donal Collins, James Doyle and Bishop Comiskey — committed their crimes in St. Peter’s. Tóibín’s belief is that these abuses proceed not from the fact that many, many young men who entered religious

orders were gay; but because as the Church's *de facto* rule was beginning to ebb in the late 1960's in Ireland. It's ministers adopted policies of torture and harassment to achieve more sinister forms of power. Tóibín has seen some of his schoolmates take to drink, become clinically depressed and kill themselves because of their inability to cope with having been abused in the past. There is bitter wisdom in Tóibín's voice on this matter. He sees through the apologies that are used to clean up the mess the Church has left in Ireland. He wrote: "They still appoint the teachers and run the schools ... The religious communities also own many of the hospitals. Their years of fucking and fondling the more vulnerable members of the congregation have ended; their years of apologising sincerely and unctuously have begun".⁸

Tóibín is at once a modern Irishman and a cosmopolitan. Writing of having found his dream house in his native Wexford and of how the commute down the east coast is made easier by the new motorway: "there are spots along that [old] road that have all the resonance and flavour of childhood ... I wish I missed the old narrow, familiar road. But I do not. I love the modernity, the coolness of the new road".⁹

In any modernity versus traditionalism debate, a benchmark of the old and sacred — the most sacred site we have — would of course be The Hill of Tara. A few years ago one could have spoken ironically of plans to destroy Tara: Who ever heard of that? Who would do such a thing? But that is the very reality threatened in Ireland. Tóibín wrote: "for those who commute each day to work from towns and villages in County Meath, it might cut twenty minutes off the journey. It will make them happy as the road to Wexford makes me happy. But it seems almost beyond belief that Ireland ... cannot find another route for the road and leave for generations to come a heritage that has been left to us".¹⁰

As ever, Tóibín shows plurality in his views.

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