

The Master by Colm Tóibín: The Untold Tales of Henry James

Cielo G. Festino

Abstract: *The aim of this paper is to make a reading of the novel The Master by Colm Tóibín, whose fictional time covers four decisive years in the life of Henry James, from 1895 to 1899. I will argue that, for once, it is James who is being watched from the perspective of a high window, the leit motif of the novel, only that instead of following James' gaze on the outside world, Tóibín enters the Master's consciousness. Hence, through the use of a central intelligence (The Master's acclaimed use of point of view) Tóibín turns James into the main character of his fiction in order to recreate those themes that most haunted him in his middle years: his frustrating experience in the theater with his play Guy Domville; the death of his parents and his sister, Alice; the suicide of his friend Constance Woolson Fenimore; his homosexuality; his not having participated in the American Civil War; being from a family of intellectuals, his having preferred fiction over history and philosophy.*

I. Introduction

Colm Tóibín's novel on the life of Henry James, *The Master* (2004), is a blending of elegance and daring. Turning Henry James into the object of his fiction, Tóibín masterfully knits the threads of his narrative through the use of a central consciousness (James' acclaimed style) that denotes a witty observation of the life of "the Master".

The fictional time of the narrative focuses on a period that covers four years of James' life, from 1895 to 1899 when this seasoned cosmopolitan had already made of England his permanent residence. He first lived in his flat in De Vere Gardens in London and then in Lamb House in Rye, Sussex. As Tóibín makes him say, "Lamb House would offer him beautiful old windows from which to view the outside; the outside, in turn, could peer in only at his invitation" (123). Lamb House would give him not only that but also a sense that he actually belonged among the English as he felt very well accepted by his new neighbours, fact he displayed with pride in front of his American friends.

This period of his life has been called by the writer's most famous biographer, Leon Edel (1963) "the treacherous years", due to James' failure in the theater with his

play *Guy Domville* (1895). It is this sad experience that Tóibín uses as his starting point in order to give unity of design to his own novel because it affected James so deeply that, according to Tóibín, “The Master” rewrote it in each one of the texts that belong to this time of his life: his stories “The Pupil” (a boy’s troubled vision of his family) “Owen Wingrave” (the story of the Civil War soldier) and his novels *The Turn of the Screw* (a ghost story through which James sublimates his own ghosts), *The Awkward Age* (as awkward as James felt in his middle years), *The Aspern Papers* (his Italian journey), *What Maisie Knew* (his masterpiece in the dramatization of the subconscious), *The Spoils of Poynton* (the spoils of his own life), among many others.

For all the suffering that James underwent during those years, he himself called that time span “the sacred years” (Edel, 1963) because this experience in the theater, that happened to be so devastating, led him, on the one hand, on an inward journey, into the most intimate recesses of his personality, and on the other, to a renovation in the style of his fiction, that confirmed him as one of the great literary masters of the English language. As Edel points out: “the stage had given him some technical skills, that he would use in his fiction; a story could be told as if it were a play; characters could be developed as they develop on stage; a novel could be given the skeletal structure of drama” (179).

Though Tóibín knows that for James, “Remaining invisible, becoming skilled in the art of self-effacement [...] gave him satisfaction” (212), he voices the Master’s silences by carefully following the figure in the carpet left by his inward journey. For once, then, it is James who is being watched from the perspective of a high window, the *leit motif* of the novel, only that instead of following James’ gaze on the outside world, Tóibín enters the Master’s consciousness.

II. The Master’s Inward Journey: James’s Untold Tales

Tóibín thus starts James on his journey to the most inward side of his soul, where he hides his most painful frustrations: “He was ready to listen, always ready to do that, but not prepared to reveal the mind at work, the imagination, or the depth of feeling” (213). To tell James’s untold tales, Tóibín turns the Master into a character, strategy that he confirms when he makes him say: “He lived, at times, he felt, as if his life belonged to someone else, a story that had not yet been written, a character who had not been fully imagined” (111). In order to show James at a crucial moment in his life, Tóibín applies in his novel the same narrative techniques to dramatize thought that James himself had developed in his fiction, to access the inner recesses of his characters’ minds.

If James watched other person’s private lives uninvited now, through Tóibín’s novel, we do the same with his own life. For all his recreation of James’s style, however, more than withholding information as James’s had done, Tóibín gives it all away.

It is not unusual that this inward journey into James’s consciousness should begin in January 1895 with a dream in which the novelist finds himself in a dream-city,

hurrying away, feeling the presence of a “person or a voice close to him who understood better than he did the urgency...” (2). However hard he tried to grasp who this being was, it eluded him. And when he tried “to leave the bustling street, it urged him to carry on” (2). One might think that James was trying to make sense of his own life or, after the disappointment of *Guy Domville*, trying to give up, but his own alter ego, the one he was always in communion with, helped him go on. It is at this critical moment, that he meets his own dead, in the figure of his aunt Kate and his mother, his two most beloved persons, who seem to both warm him against some evil and ask for help, fact that leaves him helpless. Then, he wakes up and in order to “numb himself”, he starts writing...

Tóibín thus selects some events out of the Master’s life that help him create different narrative personas through which he tries to portray some of the most conflictive facets of James’ identity: his desire to become a writer; the relationship with his brother William; his literary ambitions and frustrations; his sexual identity.

Breaking away from his family

In order to recreate James’s relationship with his family, Tóibín seems to take the cue from Edel when he points out that though James continued showing his intellectual face to the world, the complex and intricate form he gave to his writings reveals that “while his mind moved forward, his feelings turned backwards to his childhood” (178). From this perspective, in *The Master* the outstanding James family is portrayed through evocative situations that show both love and tension among the members of this very traditional American family, of great wit and intelligence.

In a way, the fact that he settled down in England, at the outset of his career, with an ocean separating him from the James in America, is a hint of the novelist’s complex relationship with his family and his desire, so to speak, to escape from it. As Tóibin makes the Master say:

He had himself, in that year, escaped into the bright old world he had longed for. He was writing stories and taking in sensations, slowly plotting his first novels. He was no longer a native of the James family, but alone in a warm climate with a clear ambition and a free imagination (114-115)

In this constraining family context, Tóibin presents James’s mother as the great bulwark that helped him be himself, and realize his great dream: that of becoming a writer and not the more public kind of figure, that the rest of the family wanted for him and that, in turn, his brother William, renowned philosopher would in the end pursue. In the same way that William would become “a public persona, full of manly expression and fearless opinions” (146), central to the American scene, Henry would recoil upon himself becoming a more and more private figure in the steady English scene that did not allow for great changes and, therefore, suited his own style and personality, to the

point that, at the end of his life, he finally became an English subject. To show his mother's support, Tóibín says that "[she] had written to say that he must spend what money he needed in feasting at the table of freedom" (115).

Tóibín's novel also portrays James's mother as helping him not to participate in the American Civil War in order to pursue his own literary career. In turn this event became one of those memories that will haunt James well into his mature years. There is a scene in Tóibín's novel when, on the occasion of the inauguration of a monument to the soldiers of the 54th Massachusetts Regiment – to which their younger brother Wilky had belonged – William is asked to deliver a speech. Tóibín shows Henry pondering on the issue:

...he wonders about the power of one unasked and tactless question which could have punctured the power of William's speech at the unveiling. It concerned William personally and Henry too; and in soft whispers now it asked why neither of them had actually fought along with their two brothers, for the cause of freedom (146).

This is one of the untold tales that, according to Tóibín is hidden in the intricacies of the Jamesian style. Very appropriately Tóibín makes him reflect: "My own taste has always been for unwritten history and my present business is with the reverse of the picture" (146).

The Second Son Nightmare

Another untold family tale that makes one of the richest vignettes in Tóibín's novel and that brings the narrative to its close, takes place when, after many years of separation, a famous and respected, but very ill, William James accompanied by his family, crosses the ocean to visit Henry at his residence, Lamb House, in Rye. They all together form what they humorously call the "Lamb House Club". Once again, not unlike James' own characters, both brothers try to reach out to each other from across their intellectual and emotional differences.

Tóibín thus builds this scene as the "second son nightmare" that, still in adulthood, Henry had trouble overcoming in his relationship with his elder brother, William. Already a mature man, Henry is presented as, once again, coerced by his past from which he has been trying to break free.

William, in a way, chides his brother for writing about the English scene when, in his opinion, he knew nothing about it, "You do not have in your possession the knowledge which Dickens or George Eliot or Trollope or Thackeray possessed of the mechanics of English greed" (316).

Then William goes on to criticize both Henry's theme and style that, in his opinion, was the direct result of his dealing with empty social matters:

I believe that the English can never be your true subject. And I believe that your style has suffered from the strain of constantly dramatizing social insipidity. I think also that something cold and thin-blooded and oddly priggish has come to the fore of your content (316).

In criticizing Henry's style, William was voicing the readers's growing irritation when faced with the Master's more and more convoluted sentences as his literary career progressed and he felt more self-confident to experiment with words and techniques: "I have to read innumerable sentences you now write twice over to see what they could possibly mean [...] In this crowded and hurried reading age you will remain unread and neglected as long as you continue to indulge in this style and these subjects" (316).

Revealing the American man's prejudice against European society, which he considered as futile, what William proposes to Henry is that he should write a historical novel about the "America he knew": "A novel which would deal with our American history rather than the small business of English manners, bad indeed as they are. A novel about the Puritan Fathers..." (317).

Throughout the scene, Tóibín presents the reader with an impassive Henry who, in a polite but biting way, tells his brother "that he would sooner descend to a dishonored grave than have written" (316) what he proposed. For Henry, who had labored to develop the form of the novel so that "it would have a theory, a conviction, a consciousness of itself behind it – of being the expression of an artistic faith, the result of choice and comparison" as he would say in "The Art of Fiction" (Veeder and Briffin 165), his brother's words were anathema.

What I understand Tóibín is trying to dramatize through William's speech is first, the old Puritanical superstition "of fiction being wicked" (166), as Henry James himself points out in his essay "The Art of Fiction" (1884), because it was believed "to be opposed in some mysterious manner to morality, to amusement, to instruction" (168). Second, the Philistine belief that "the artistic idea would spoil some of their fun" (169), as William had reproached Henry when saying that he had to read some of his sentences more than twice.

Tóibín's phrasing of Henry's rebuttal to his brother, deserves to be quoted at full length and I believe, reads like a tribute to the Master:

I view the historical novel as tainted by a fatal cheapness and if you want a statement from me on the matter in clear American and since you wish me to pander to the crowded, hurried age, as you call it, might I tell you my opinion of a novel to be written by me about the Puritan Fathers? [...] It would be all one word, Henry said. One simple word. It would be all humbug! (317).

We understand that Tóibín's articulation of Henry's answer is built on the Master's theory of the novel that will pave the way for Modernism and that, paradoxically,

borrowed from his brother's psychological theory of the "stream of consciousness", as he also points out in "The Art of Fiction":

A novel is in its broadest definition a personal, a direct impression of life: that, to begin with, constitutes its value, which is greater or less according to the intensity of the impression. But there will be no intensity at all, and therefore no value, unless there is freedom to feel and say. The tracing of a line to be followed, of a tone to be taken, of a form to be filled out, is a limitation of that freedom and a suppression of the very thing we are most curious about. The form, it seems to be, is to be appreciated after the fact: then the author's choice has been made, his standard has been indicated; then we can follow lines and directions and compare tones and resemblances [...] The advantage, the luxury, as well as the torment and responsibility of the novelist, is that there is no limit to what he may attempt as an executant –no limit to his possible experiments, efforts, discoveries, successes [...] His manner is his secret... (170).

Once again Tóibín pays tribute to James as he presents him as being truthful to his own manner of writing fiction to the end of his life. In spite of not being widely read, James's novels became more and more experimental, fact that actually turned him into one of the most emblematic names of the novel in English. James never compromised his art for mercenary reasons. As Tóibín makes him reflect, "He retained his pride in decisions taken, the fact that he had never compromised, that his back ached and his eyes hurt solely because he continued to labor all day at an art that was pure and unconstrained by mere mercenary ambitions" (20).

Craving for Recognition

However, in his speech, William had strung a most intimate cord in Henry: the fact that he was becoming less and less popular, and that he was feeling frustrated as fewer and fewer people read his novels. His wanting to enter the theater, with his play *Guy Domville*, at the time that Oscar Wilde was the rage in England, bears witness to that. As he prepared himself for the debut of his play, Tóibín makes James say "This is [...] how the real world conducts itself, the world he had withdrawn from, the world he guessed at. This is how money is made, how reputations are established" (Tóibín 14).

His play *Guy Domville*, "the story of a rich Catholic heir who must choose to carry on the family line or join a monastery" (Tóibín 3) and, defying his family, decided to renounce the world and devote himself to a life of contemplation and prayer in the monastery" (Tóibín 11) actually resounded with James's own personal conflicts and choices both at a personal and professional level: becoming the person his family had expected him to be in America or being the person he was in England; writing what the

public expected or being loyal to his muse. The play proved to be an utter failure and had a serious impact on James.

Tóibín's novel suggests that some of the fiction written by James at this time like the story of the ghostly infants Flora and Miles in *The Turn of the Screw* is "...an aspect of himself" during this period of crisis, a continuation of the author's conflicts in his own fiction. I understand that this insight reveals that Tóibín in his novel tries to see beyond the Master's public figure, his intellectual identification, into his emotional identification, that he was at pains to hide from the world.

Tóibín's novel thus seems to show that the psychological journey James himself embarked upon in part accounts for the nature of his plots and style. It is as if he were trying to lose himself in a labyrinth of words in order not to face his most private wishes and desires and, at the same time, to find relief from his own inner conflicts.

Hence, in an elegant style that implicitly mimics the Jamesian preference for the subtly suggested, Tóibín, a master himself, moves backwards and forwards in time to rescue images and situations that reveal the almost elusive moment of transition when James transmuted his personal experience into fiction, to the point that memories and narration become one: "Often, ideas came to him like this, casually, without warning; often they occurred to him at moments when he was busy with other things" (63).

One of these moments of transition, between James's life and his own fiction, is suggested by the design of *Guy Domville's* plot: the choice between a life that the world approved of and a life of his own choice. As I see it, it actually mimics the matrix of James's most private untold tale carefully hidden in the intricate figure traced by his many narratives: his own sexual identity, which Edel significantly calls "the love that did not speak its name". (188)

The Love that did not speak its Name

Dealing with James' sexuality in a novel is a delicate affair since the Master had always narrated his physical and sensual side by omission, when he markedly emphasized the intellectual and reflective side of man. Once again, mimicking the Jamesian style of dramatizing through the written word what one is denied in life, Tóibín actually deciphers this unsaid and unspoken aspect in James' life through scenes that portray the writer's dilemma at finding himself at the crossroad between reticence and longing, his own convictions and social mores, his own consciousness and society. This hidden self of James's, a mixture of desire and fear, is thus rendered through Tóibín's prose with a tenderness and refined artistry that reveal both subtlety and incisiveness on the part of Irish writer.

Resorting to James's techniques to picture and dramatize the secret side of the mind of his characters, Tóibín follows the Master on a very private journey that he had never dared complete or write about. Voicing the world of private and silent thought, Tóibín makes James narrate and reflect his frustrated attempt at meeting Paul Joukowsky, a young and wealthy Russian painter that belonged to the entourage of the Russian writer Ivan Turgenev with whom James was infatuated. However, given the Master's

reticence, the young man's open homosexual behaviour had drawn them apart. In the novel, Tóibín makes Henry James say:

He wondered now if these hours were not the truest he had ever lived. The most accurate comparison he could find was with a smooth, hopeful, hushed sea journey, an interlude suspended between two countries, standing there as though floating knowing that one step would be a step into the impossible, the vast unknown (Tóibín 9).

Like James's own characters of the international episode, trapped in between two worlds, Tóibín presents the Master as unable to complete his journey in his real life between convention and his own desires. In a manner that reminds the reader of Daisy Miller or Isabel Archer, irritatingly spoiling their best chances, Tóibín shows a dejected James standing for hours on a Parisian street, "wet with rain, brushed at intervals by those passing by" (Tóibín 10) looking up at his friend's window but unable to mount the stairs and knock on his door.

Then, Tóibín shows James trying to write his untold tale of what had happened that night up to the moment he had dared live: "the rest of the story was imaginary, and it was something he would never allow himself to put into words" (10). And Tóibín makes him reflect:

It was something he had written before and had been careful to destroy. It seemed strange, almost sad, to him that he had produced and published so much, rendered so much that was private, and yet the thing that he most needed to write would never be seen or published, would never be known or understood by anyone (9).

III. Final Words

As I see it, Tóibín's novel reads like a tribute to one of the undisputed masters of both American and English letters in more than one way. *The Master* actually dramatizes some of James's literary precepts. The first being that, as Tóibín's characterization of James shows, through observation, all life becomes a fiction. The second that, as sometime Henry told his brother William, if through his philosophical writings, this last one tried to make sense of life he, through the stories that his family resented for their "insipidity", tried to make life come alive. Finally, the most important Jamesian precept is that as Henry tells William in Tóibín's fiction and, in turn, Tóibín confirms through his characterization of James, "...the moral of literature is the most pragmatic we can imagine. It is that life is a mystery and only sentences are beautiful".

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