

The Fiction of Colm Tóibín

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Colm Tóibín's first novel, *The South* (1990), came along with a eulogistic cover comment from John Banville: "*The South* is a daring, imaginative feat; the world it conjures is at once familiar and strange, and strangely moving. A splendid first novel". One must be forgiven for entertaining some doubt as to whether Banville was being serious when penning the blurb. More likely, this was a case of one Wexford man doing a good turn for another Wexford man. For the novel is anything but a daring, imaginative feat, and that verbal juggling resulting in the phrase "at once familiar and strange, and strangely moving" would seem to give the game away.

The South offers the story of Enniscorthy-born Katherine Proctor, starting in 1950 and ending somewhere around 1971. At the opening, Katherine is in Barcelona to work there as a painter. She has separated from her husband and boy-child, who have remained in Ireland. The precise reason why she left them remains unconvincingly vague. It appears that she did so because her husband was not prepared to stop a court case against some neighbouring farmer whose animals had invaded his grounds. In Barcelona she strikes up with one Miguel, a fellow-painter, who is still traumatised by the Spanish civil war and the sufferings he underwent. Before too long, the couple is joined by an Irishman, called Michael Graves, who likewise hails from around Enniscorthy, and from early on the reader may surmise that Graves will at a later stage become embroiled with Katherine, which, sure enough, is the case towards the ending of the narrative. Meanwhile, Miguel has an exhibition of his work in which a highly compromising portrait of Franco plays a conspicuous, though in the final analysis inconsequential, part. Miguel and Katherine go to live in a house in Pallosa, where Miguel had frequently stayed during the civil war. The police come to check on Miguel and start harassing him. As a result of what the text calls their being ravenous for each other, Miguel and Katherine produce a daughter. Five years after her arrival in Spain, Katherine pays a fleeting visit to Dublin to see her husband about financial matters.

Then one of Miguel's friends from civil war days dies after having being severely maltreated by the police; Miguel himself is beaten up in prison; slowly but surely things begin to fall apart; the centre cannot hold; and in the end, Miguel is killed in a car accident together with his young daughter. Regrettably, that accident is delineated in a very feeble manner. Fourteen years after the opening, Katherine is back in Barcelona, pointlessly and insipidly talking to the dead Miguel: "Miguel, I am the woman who wanders about inside the port as the daylight goes, carrying a canvas, an easel and oils" (p. 163) and telling him that she is not in love with Michael Graves. Next she settles in

Dublin, spends a holiday with her mother in Portugal, comes partly to live with her son and his family near Enniscorthy, painting the sea, has an exhibition in Dublin before the narrative folds in a vexingly, inconclusive way:

‘It used to be garlic. When I knew you first you wanted a woman tasting of garlic.’

‘It’s age. Now I want gin. That’s what age is doing to me.’ He stared into the fire for a moment, then turned and looked at her again. (p. 238)

In toto, it unfortunately amounts to pretty small beer.

Some ado is made about the fact that Katherine’s family was burnt out during the Troubles, after which event her mother left to live in London, abandoning her husband and daughter. The latter aspect may explain the fraught relationship between Katherine and her mother, which, God be praised, is eventually patched up, as is Katherine’s relationship with her son and his family. Yet, the political dimension of the historical event during the Civil War is left curiously unfocused. Moreover, the novel is permeated with cracker-barrel disquisitions on painting and the use of colour, such as this one: “Rogent talked about colour and form, he talked about beauty, he spoke about using paint for its own sake” (p. 61). Technically, the narrative account is seriously marred by numerous inadequacies. There is, to begin with, a gratuitous hopscotching among different points-of-view, alternating between third-person and first-person, without any discernible conceptual necessity or any thematic gain. In addition to the perspectival shifts, the narrative employs letters and diary entries, as if in exemplification of the school of thought which suggests that when one has nothing of substance to say, one had better fool around with different textual modes. Some of the dialogue passages have a distinctly fatuous note to them. Here is one:

‘So you’re going to stay in Spain?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘You’ll be able to come and visit us.’

‘I’ve enjoyed meeting you. I like you,’ he said, and then he grinned. ‘In fact, I almost love you.’

‘Every time you start to be serious you make a joke,’ she said.

‘You grasp things quickly, don’t you? You grasped the differences between us more quickly than I did.’

‘That wasn’t hard, was it?’ (p.79)

Too frequently, the text groans under the weight of vapid stuff that is all as interesting as the next man’s meanderings about his outdoor jokes. What is “the effortless throb of orgasm” (p. 27)? A first novel, to warrant the praise heaped upon it by the blurb, needs more matter with less art, as Gertrude famously said. The Blackwater Lighthouse, one

of the two lighthouses near Enniscorthy, is mentioned (p. 214). It will lend its name to Tóibín's fourth novel to date. But, again, that, as well as other things about *The South*, is of little consequence.

At first, the narrative discourse in Tóibín's *The Heather Blazing* (1992) may put one in mind of how H.G. Wells characterised Henry James's prose style: "It is a magnificent but painful hippopotamus resolved at all costs [...] upon picking up a pea which has got into the corner of its den". Exceptionally slow-paced, labouring at the tiniest of details, dried out to a monkish purity, Tóibín's way of telling his story has a curiously tedious effect about it, not unlike that emanating from specimens of the *nouveau roman*. Upon reflection, it may strike one that the distinctive prose style of the novel could be designed to mirror the consciousness of Tóibín's protagonist, Eamon Redmond, an Irish High Court judge, a man obsessed all his life with the letter and spirit of the law, with his mother's death when he was a child, the death of his uncle from tuberculosis, the slow, lingering death of his father, and more recently the death of his wife, Carmel. He is haunted, too, by his own country's past, his family's involvement in the 1916 Rising and the mayhem of the War of Independence, the founding of the Fianna Fáil party and its coming to power (de Valera and Charlie Haughey put in cameo appearances). Eamon's life unfolds in painstaking images as he seeks consolation in the strange beauty of the slowly eroding landscape of his childhood on the east coast of Ireland.

The Heather Blazing is not a stream-of-consciousness novel; instead it is – very much like Henry James's novels – a novel with a central intelligence, that of Eamon Redmond, a reflector through which everything is relayed. The fastidious, painstaking narrative style characterises a fastidious, painstaking person; the austerity of the discourse typifies a man of few words, tight-lipped even with his wife, a man who has "learnt never to need anything from anyone", who has "never asked anyone for anything" lest he should be turned down (p. 228).

The Heather Blazing is a finely structured narrative. The chapters, alternately presenting the past and the present, as well as the three parts into which the book is divided, are cleverly dovetailed. Myriad parallelisms in the arrangement of events are effected; correspondences abound. Thus, for instance, the opening sentences of Part III are the first sentences of Part I *verbatim*. The parallelisms and correspondences intimately link the past to the present, throwing into relief the multiple similarities.

The title 'the heather blazing' is taken from a rebel song:
A rebel hand set the heather blazing
And brought the neighbours from far and near. (p. 74)

The rebel aspect is quite significant, denoting a romantic nationalistic and patriotic Ireland. Eamon's grandfather, interestingly, was regarded as "the last of the Fenians" (p. 76). When Eamon asks his uncle whether they burnt any houses during the War of Independence, the uncle replies: "We gutted a good few of them all right [...] Wulton,

old Captain Skrine, the Proctors of the Bunclody Road, Castleboro [...]” “Were they all Protestants?” Eamon then wants to know. “They were”, his uncle says. “And they were all up to their neck in the British Army who were on the rampage here, and the British Legion and the King and the Queen. It’s all gone now.” (pp. 171f.) That last sentence: ‘It’s all gone now’ offers a clue – gone, just as the receding shoreline will be gone in a number of years.

Eamon Redmond represents a generation for which that romantic, rebel-rousing Ireland has ceased to exist. He is a most decent, ordinary man, standing for an Ireland which is not idealised and is free of romantic claptrap, or so it would seem. There is a telling little scene in which an historian who is doing research on the response of the Irish government to the violence in Northern Ireland wants some information from Eamon, but is fobbed off by him. Notably, Eamon had written an analysis of Irish nationalist feeling for the government. He had warned that public opinion should never be allowed to become inflamed in the Republic by events within its own borders. Now he is quite happy that the analysis never came to light. As Julia O’Faolain astutely notes, honest according to his lights, Eamon “represents an Establishment riven by bisected consciousness whose brief is to keep the peace while paying obligatory tribute to the rebel nationalism of the old songs”.¹ Acting as judge in a case involving a sixteen-year-old pregnant girl who is not allowed by the authorities to return to her Catholic school the following term, he realises „that he [has] no strong moral views, that he [has] ceased to believe in anything“ (p. 90), that he is „not equipped to be a moral arbiter“ (p. 92). He rules on cases calling for a changing morality, taking a conservative line and irritably dismissing the liberal views of his daughter and son.

The Heather Blazing may have been intended as an analysis of an Ireland as represented by Eamon’s generation, an ordinary, hidden Ireland. But first and foremost, the novel offers a brilliant study of a solitary man, immensely moving in scenes such as those treating of Carmel’s illness and incapacitation, or the ones presenting the grief-stricken protagonist trying to get over his wife’s untimely demise.

Tóibín then published *The Story of the Night* (1996), a novel that reminds one of Abraham Lincoln’s comment on the *Memoirs* of one G.W.E. Russell: “People who like this sort of thing will find this the sort of thing they like”. It is an excruciatingly insufferable book about a gay young man, half English and half Argentinean, living in Buenos Aires during the time of the Falklands war, when Carlos Menem gradually came to power, as Argentina emerged from the shadows of the seventies and the legacy of the Generals. He gets involved in the privatisation of Argentina’s oil industry and becomes embroiled with assorted lovers. All that buggering waxes decisively boring in the long run. What presumption on the part of the author to assume that anyone, apart from himself, could be interested in observing his protagonist venting his sexual hang-ups! The most disparaging deficiency of the novel is that the twin thematic skeins - the protagonist’s activities in the political events and his personal sexual problems - only intertwine in a rather unsatisfactory manner. Over large stretches, the former strand is pushed into oblivion by the latter, which clearly preoccupies Tóibín’s interest.

Part I of the book, charting Richard Garay's youth and adolescence and featuring quite prominently the slow dying of the mother, is of spurious significance for the rest of the narrative account. Tóibín piles up matter upon matter. Unfortunately a good deal of what he amasses remains rather inconsequential. There is a trip to Barcelona, when Richard is twenty-one, with a friend called Jorge, who has sex with two girls from a group of Chilean refugees, while Richard is lying in bed in the same room, pretending to be asleep. What the ado about one of the Chileans, named Raúl, who was badly tortured in captivity, is meant to contribute to 'the story of the night' is left uncertain. By the same token, the political dimension of the events in Argentina is too vague to make a noteworthy impression. Richard's involvement with the two Americans, Susan and Richard Ford, who are working for the Institute for Economic Development and who help him land a lucrative job, basically serves to establish a social context within which he can play his sexual pranks. Essentially they spend their time together eating and drinking, apart from a single occasion in which Susan entices Garay into her bed. Her seductive powers are of course to no avail, given his homosexual bent. So she is forced to have herself serviced by other male acquaintances. Her husband, you see, is a bit of a dud.

Then Richard falls in love and conducts a lengthy affair with one of the sons of the Canetto family. His name is Pablo. His brother, the priapic Jorge, is meanwhile having a carry-on with Susan Ford. Almost inevitably, both Richard and Pablo contract AIDS. The account of that period in the two men's lives, which takes up the last forty or so pages of the novel, is quite moving, if you go in for that kind of thing. It is about the only part of the book that can be said to be (mildly) compelling in a disappointing performance that shows its unsatisfactory nature not least in its ending, a vexing let-down in that the narrative simply stops, as if Tóibín had had no real idea as to how to finish 'the story of the night'. Richard and Pablo, after having been discharged from hospital, go to Richard's apartment, and here is the last sentence: "He asked me to wake him in an hour or two if he was still asleep" (p. 312).

Tóibín's next novel, *The Blackwater Lightship* (1999), was shortlisted for the Booker Prize, if that is anything to go by these days, when exceedingly incompetent novels become elevated in this fashion, so that a place on the shortlist is no longer a distinction. A none too well-meaning critic could supposedly argue that the whole narrative set-up in *The Blackwater Lightship* serves to create an occasion for Tóibín to deal with the topics of homosexuality and the problems related to it – here in the form of AIDS. Good for those who are interested in what seems of pressing significance to Tóibín himself and too bad for the rest.

There still is some validity in the tenet according to which to capture the general in the particular is the true distinction of a good novel, or a convincing piece of literature. But take away the particular from *The Blackwater Lightship* and nothing much is left. And there is another aspect: Helen, her mother, Lily, and her grandmother come together in Granny's house in Cush to take care of Helen's brother, Declan, who is dying of

AIDS. Present are also Declan's friends, Larry and Paul, who have been looking after him for some time. Not only have the three women up to now been unaware of Declan's illness, but, more is the pity, they have not hit it off too well with each other during the last ten years or so. In particular, Helen's relationship with Lily has been fraught with severe problems ever since her father died of cancer. Helen was still a girl then and when she and young Declan were sent off to stay with Granny, while her mother in Dublin was looking after her husband, who was dying in hospital, Helen felt that she and her brother had been abandoned for good.

Not surprisingly, in the course of their confinement to the house in Cush and their nursing of Declan, Helen and her mother are finally able to effect a reconciliation. Pretty much the same applies to the relationships between Declan and his mother as well as to that between the two older women, who have not been on good terms either. It is a fairly ordinary family affair, I hear you say; probably, but what is even more disparaging is that we certainly have been here before: people who for long have fallen out become reconciled again *in extremis*. But perchance there is something commendable in the manner in which Tóibín has rendered this relatively olde chestnut. Not really, one regrets noting. There is a discernible attempt to mark the narrative with motific echoes, as when the scene involving young Helen and Declan in Granny's house, which Helen remembers towards the beginning of the Book, is evoked once more towards the close by the set-up in the same house and by Helen and her mother's discussing it. Or Lily's supposed neglect of her children is counterpointed with Helen's consideration for hers, who are with their father in Donegal while she, like her mother years ago, is elsewhere looking after a dying member of the family. There are also certain narrative sections which pay tribute to Tóibín's competence as a writer. Yet, in all, he has not refrained from seasoning his account with a good deal of inconsequential matter, such as the party at the opening, as well as with what may be felt to be too lurid and too frequent descriptions of Declan's suffering. Perhaps the latter are necessary to generate the appropriate situation and atmosphere in which the three women have to make up. Even so, the question remains: is this a novel about someone dying of AIDS or about a family reunion? It is both, Tóibín would presumably argue. Yet, such an argument smacks of a "have your cake and eat it" case, for the main focus is unquestionably, or so it would seem, on the familial relationships and the fact that Declan is dying of AIDS is of secondary importance or even less. He might just as well be the victim of some other incurable disease. But, then, of course Tóibín could not promulgate a cause that seems dearest to his heart.

One man's meat is another man's poison. We have known as much for a long time. It, therefore, cannot come as a surprise that readers will come away from *The Blackwater Lightship* with different impressions. My preference is decidedly for the manner in which the narrative solves the conflict between, first and foremost, Helen and her mother; how, in other words, Helen overcomes the bitter resentment against Lily which has clouded most of her life. Second, there is the riven relationship between Lily and *her* mother, which must take second place, because a) the narrative is largely rendered

from Helen's third-person perspective, thus placing greater emphasis on her experience, and b) that relationship is not strung out in such a colourful and complex way as that in which Helen and Lily find themselves. Thirdly, of course, we have Declan's problems with his mother and their resolution, which is not devoid of a tinge of sentimentality when Declan eventually manages to whisper: "Mammy, Mammy, help me, Mammy" (p.258), with his friend Paul chiming in: "He's been wanting to say that for a long time" (p. 259).

In this reading, the novel has its shortcomings. Thus, for instance, the book starts rather inconspicuously, not to say unpromisingly. Some of the things offered in the first two chapters are curiously slow-paced and of tenuous significance. Not least because of this does it take about one hundred pages (more than one third of the book) to establish the relevant situation in the grandmother's house in Cush. Furthermore, some of the material woven into Helen's story, if we may call it that, reads somewhat spurious, or reads as if it were an end in itself: for example, Larry's and Paul's stories concerning their lives as gay men or Paul's marriage to his partner by a priest in Brussels. In both cases, Tóibín takes occasion to rail at the bigoted attitude to homosexuality in Ireland. There is, moreover, the indistinct business concerning the recurrent references to the erosion of the coastline around Cush yet again. The land is being eaten up by the sea and some metaphorical or symbolical meaning seems to be attached to that fact, though what this meaning may be remains pitifully obscure. One must, however, also note that the novel has its positive moments, among them, naturally, that conflict between Helen and Lily, or the admirable manner in which Tóibín succeeds in depicting the scene in the house in Cush, where Larry and Paul competently take care of Declan's corporeal difficulties while the women around them are tearing into one another.

The Blackwater Lightship, the second lighthouse near Cush, has disappeared like much of the coastline. But it is still in the memory of the characters, as is their past which with they have still failed to come to grips past. Measuring the novel's merits against its deficiencies leaves one with the problem of making sense of why it should have been shortlisted for the Booker Prize. The shortlists of the last years have always featured a token Irishmen who, apart from Roddy Doyle (what a choice!), never won. Could it be that Tóibín was one of that ilk?

In the rambling Introduction to his *The Penguin Book of Irish Fiction* (1999), which is distinctly dropsical with quotations from other critics' writings and which serves up a plethora of Ye Olde Chestnuts and wrong-headed ideas, such as these:

there is almost no version of domestic harmony at the end [sic] of an Irish novel; there is almost no version of domestic harmony at the beginning of an Irish novel; there is no Irish novel which ends in a wedding or a match being made. Irish fiction is not like that; Irish fiction is full of dislocation and displacement.²

(as if Tóibín knew them all!) – in this Introduction, then, Tóibín, after noting that “[i]n much Irish fiction there is a reticence on sexual matters” (p. xxvi), has this to say:

Irish writing and gay writing have the myth of a tragic destiny in common. It is easy to see why homosexuality as a theme has attracted so many Irish writers. Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* still remains the greatest gay novel ever written [...] (p. xxvii)

Has homosexuality as a theme really attracted so many Irish writers? And to call *Dorian Gray* “the greatest gay novel ever written” presupposes a curiously idiosyncratic reading, or misreading, of the novel, in which a host of thematic concerns other than homosexuality (if it really figures at all) are of incomparably weightier significance. Tóibín goes on to underpin his contention thus:

It is remarkable how many times in Irish fiction of the past twenty years the theme [*i.e.* homosexuality] has emerged: in the work of John Banville, Val Mulherns, Ita Daly, Desmond Hogan, Mary Dorcey, Patrick McCabe, Dermot Bolger, Frank Ronan, Joseph O’Connor, Colum McCann, Emma Donoghue. (p. xxvii)

Ah, well, it would appear that Dominie Tóibín kens them a’, after all, to adapt the ruminations someone else made in a different context. Tóibín may be only too modest to include himself in the list, and yet the above comments read as if he is blowing his own trumpet. At the heel of the hunt, it is of course no so much a matter of whether one likes his kind of music, it is rather a matter of whether the music is played well. Tóibín started out as a journalist, and he is probably a good journalist, but there is a great gap between a journalist and a novelist worth his salt. Tóibín still has to earn the reputation that has been foisted upon him in these hyping times of publicity.

Notes

- 1 Julia O’Faolain, “Keeping the peace”, *TLS*, Sep. 4, 1992, p. 19.
- 2 *The Penguin Book of Irish Fiction*. London: Penguin, 1999, p. xxiii.

Works Cited

- Colm Tóibín, *The South*. London: Serpent’s Tail, 1990.
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