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HJEAS

Colm Tóibín is the award-winning author of six novels, including *The Story of the Night*, *The Blackwater Lightship*, and *The Heather Blazing*. *The Master* (2004), his novel based on the life of Henry James, was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize and won the *Los Angeles Times* Novel of the Year Award in 2005 and the Prix du Meilleur Livre Étranger in France. His novel *Brooklyn*, related to James's *The Portrait of a Lady*, was long listed for the Man Booker and won the Costa Novel Award in 2009. His collection of stories, *The Empty Family*, appeared in 2010. His nonfiction works include *Bad Blood: A Walk Along the Irish Border*, *Homage to Barcelona*, *The Sign of the Cross: Travels in Catholic Europe*, and, most recently, *Love in a Dark Time*. In 2004, his first play, *Beauty in a Broken Place*, was produced in the Abbey Theatre in Tóibín's hometown, Dublin, and in 2011 his second play, *Testament*, premiered at the Dublin Theatre Festival.

Since 2002 Tóibín has been engaged with Henry James in various forms as he has produced several introductions, reviews, talks, and essays relating to James. Tóibín identifies with James since they are both Irish, gay, single, social, and literary. The volume *All a Novelist Needs*, edited by Susan M. Griffin, brings together Tóibín's nonfiction pieces and explores the relationship Tóibín the author and the man has to Henry James the author and the man. In a talk about his new novel on Radio Open Source, he comments on his general interest in James:

The James thing was interesting to me, too, in that James dealt with dramatizations of secrecy and of people having things they keep to themselves and that, if known, will be explosive And I was in that dramatic power of withholding, which is something I think I have learned a lot about from James—in his own life and perhaps more so in his fiction. (Lydon 2009)

Scenes of people having secrets, managing information, manipulating the understanding of others, and the dramatic power of the distribution of knowledge in human relations constitute the basic topics by Henry James the author.

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Yet, in Tóibín's understanding, "James's work demands attention to the scenes and situations of writing" (Griffin x); in other words, for Tóibín, James's fictive interests are organically connected to his biography, to events in his life. If one sees the actual connection between life and art for James, one gets a better understanding of the workings of the creative process for him, an understanding of how James worked. This biographically oriented interest does not aim at finding answers to biographical secrets from the work such as the secret of James's covert homosexuality or mysterious illnesses. By no means would Tóibín like to "dot the i" like the critic in "The Figure in the Carpet." On the contrary, he thinks critics who attempt to find an autobiographical base for James's best fiction miss the point of what James was doing (Tóibín, *All a Novelist Needs* 109). Instead, he is seeking to find a Jamesian poetics about the connection of the real and art, how language and form could produce something much richer than life. Pursuing this interest in the various essays, he manages to lay out a biographically based epistemology of Jamesian art.

As a starting point, Tóibín places much emphasis on collecting information about James's life. He is interested in the biographical context of the novels, the editions of his correspondence, the biographies about the James family and its individual members, diverse biographies of James himself, whatever sources he can find about James's relation to other men. No wonder, then, that his novelistic account of James's life in *The Master* builds upon Lyndall Gordon's biography, *A Private Life*. Tóibín considers this biography the best to date in that it focuses on James's relationship to two women, his cousin Minny Temple and the author Constance Fenimore Woolson, and his use of their lives, characters, and deaths as "material" for his art. Gordon's project is to present James's art as a form of neurosis arising from his homosexuality, while she clearly dislikes the way James made use of his "materials." She blames James for Minny's and Fenimore's deaths as partly caused by his lack of care and emotional involvement in both instances. Tóibín, in *The Master*, would like to problematize this view of James sacrificing life for art—Leon Edel's groundbreaking biography of James had viewed this positively (Kovács), while Gordon's clearly does not. In *The Master*, Tóibín dramatized the dilemma ambiguously, never giving an opinion, where "every single thing observed and understood would be seen through James's eyes" (Tóibín 32). The dramatization of secrecy in James's own life constitutes a rendering of Jamesian "life" through Jamesian aesthetics into Jamesian "art" as Tóibín understands it.

All a Novelist Needs brings into critical focus Tóibín's biographically oriented Jamesian epistemology. It is no overstatement to say that Tóibín has forged an inspired reading of the workings of the Jamesian imagination that transforms bits of life into art—and has made this aesthetics his own. Chapters two, three, and ten address this issue directly. In chapter 3, "A More Elaborate Web," Tóibín claims that the basis of the imaginative process is a process of merging the deeply personal with the imagined (36). Things that matter are stored in the mind and then are reconsidered and narrated.

It allows for a Freudian reading of novels and for novels to be read as a form of neurosis, but it is often much simpler: things that have mattered emotionally, often for the quality of their pattern, their beauty, their emotional shape, things that are not necessarily traumatic lodge in the mind, becoming shadows until you sit at a desk and begin to work out a pattern of words and images and then they become substantial and then they block the way of narrative progress and then they are allowed onto the page. (36)

Tóibín gives an example of this process from James's texts that he imagined further. There is a scene of sexual almostness Henry James Sr. and Jr. experience when walking along the beach at Boulogne sur Mer: the elder James watches a young fisherwoman with a fine stride and shining limbs as she wades from the sea with her basket of shrimp (33). We know about this scene from a letter the father wrote soon after it happened in 1857. This image of the wet fisherwoman on the beach being watched by a gentleman, Sir Claude, appears in *What Maisie Knew* from 1897, and then will be part of *The Master* as a scene about the son's experience of his father. This is just one traceable example of how, for James, a scene and its impression lurks in the background, possibly for decades, and is then utilized to complete the impression. In chapter 2 on Tóibín's visit to Lamb House, Rye describes how Tóibín sought for such impressions in James's house for *The Master*.

These accounts of the Jamesian imagination will remind any Jamesian of the working of experience in "The Art of Fiction." In "The Art of Fiction" James accounts for the myriad forms of personal *senses of reality* by the nature of experience. For James, reality comes into being through personal experience. Although James starts out by criticizing as inconclusive the claim that one should write from experience, he basically accepts the very same idea. One should write from experience but this is not a

prerequisite by which to evaluate authors, for experience is a process and one cannot evaluate such an idiosyncratic phenomenon. James uses a spectacular spatial metaphor to illuminate the process:

Experience is never limited, and it is never complete; it is an immense sensibility, a kind of huge spider-web of the finest silken-threads suspended in the chamber of consciousness, and catching every air-borne particle in its tissue. It is the very atmosphere of the mind, and when the mind is imaginative—much more when it happens to be that of a man of genius—it takes to itself the faintest hints of life, it converts the very pulses of the air into revelations. (52)

Experience, then, is a sensibility that collects impulses. Experience happens in one's consciousness and constitutes the processes going on in the mind. When experience is fine, in other words, when the web in one's consciousness is sensitive, the web of experience can sense even the tiniest impulses and attribute meaning to them. Imagination is the quality of the mind which makes the process of experience fine, sensitive, which motors the unlimited, incomplete process called experience. James adds that an author can represent only this personal experience when he writes.

Tóibín's descriptions of the relationship between life and art are related to James's view of experience, and, more specifically, to his very metaphor of the chamber of the mind. One can find scattered references to the imagination in spatial metaphors, like Tóibín's insistence that "the imagination is a set of haunted, half-lit rooms" (*All a Novelist Needs* 21). This spatial image also occurs in his account of the James's experience of New York city in *The American Scene* where he describes the elderly James's disappointment of modern New York City in terms of an attack against his imagined New York City space:

For certain writers, places long abandoned and experiences just as well forgotten continue to exist in the present tense. . . . They live lives of their own in the mind. They are like rooms whose electric lights cannot be dimmed or switched off. For James, the New York of 1848 to 1855 was such a place, and his experiences there . . . did not fade from his memory They remained living presences. He was moving now fifty years later in a city that tried, in name of novelty [sic], to prevent him re-inhabiting his lighted rooms. (66)

New York City and its modernity are criticized as an enemy of the imaginative space of the mind, a space no longer providing the basis for imaginative activity, as can be seen in James's New York stories.

In the other article dedicated to the problem of the creative process, "All the Novelist Needs," Tóibín again describes the way a novelist transforms an impression of life into art in terms of the Jamesian idea of experience building upon impression: "This is all a novelist needs, nothing exact or precise, no character to be based on an actual person, but a configuration, something distant that can be mulled over, guessed at, dreamed about, imagined, a set of shadowy relations the writer can begin to put substance on" (*All a Novelist Needs* 110). This imaginative process results in James's idea that art is more complete than life.

As James imagined his books, he saw life as shadow and the art he produced as substance. He believed that language and form, the tapestry of the novel, could produce something much richer than mere life, something that offered what was chaotic and fascinating a sort of complex and golden completion. (109)

As a way to reach this completion, he watched out for dramatic moments, or "scenes," in which moral conflicts, secrecy, infidelity, and power relations between people could be patterned, and played out these scenes in interpersonal relationships. For Tóibín, James's covert homosexuality provided such scenes of "sexual almostness" galore.

James's interest in moral problems is linked to his interest in the imaginative process, Tóibín claims (110-11). He is interested in morality as a scene in which the working of the experience can be played out, in morality as poetics, as Tóibín puts it (110). In this context concepts like right and wrong lose meaning and become subject to imaginative processing. In the essay about James's New York, Tóibín elaborates on the moral aspect by maintaining that James decided early on that he would write about the private, intricate feelings in the relations between people, mainly between men and women—"duplicitous and greed, disappointment and renunciation, which became his most pressing themes, occurred for James in the private realm" (52). His darkest concerns like illicit love, misguided loyalty, and sexual coldness can be traced mainly in his stories that he wrote quickly and for money.

In other chapters, Tóibín's view of the Jamesian imagination is played out in the context of diverse James-related issues. In chapter 1,

Tóibín studies James's relation to his Irishness as a source of anxiety. Chapter 4 traces the web of relations at Lamb House that are metamorphosed into "The Turn of the Screw." His relation to Italian locations and views on the lives of fellow artisans and love or marriage are explored in chapter 5 in connection to his stories about authors. James's relation to New York City as an imagined space is thematized in chapter 6 that introduces his New York stories. Chapter 7 on *The Portrait* and chapter 11 on the biography of Alice Gibbens James, William James's wife, explores his relation to diverse women. The role his family played in his life of deceptions is mapped out in chapter 9 about diverse editions of his correspondence.

In place of a conclusion, the collection ends with a short story titled "Silence" that dramatizes the secrets of sexual passion and artistic creativity. Based on a notebook entry by James from 1894 that has never been actualized, it is Tóibín who writes the story. The story is about a young widow, Lady Gregory, thinking about her past blissful adulterous relationship and her need to communicate the unmentionable secret lest it cease to exist. She has already written an amorous sonnet cycle that was published under the name of her former lover, but she also has to communicate her secret secretly, and to none other than Henry James, who thrives on such "incidents." She tells him the story that James recorded in the notebook entry hoping he will write it. So we have the dramatization of a moral ambiguity in a man-woman relation. No opinion is given as a central consciousness reports about the events. Also, the problems of communication and creativity shroud the indecency as Tóibín completes the Jamesian real into Tóibín's art, if you like.

The collection focuses on a key aspect of Jamesian aesthetics in a highly enjoyable manner. Tóibín reviews a vast amount of material connected to James; his main interest drives him through a maze of novels, stories, dramas, notebooks, letters, autobiographies, and biographies, while he remains less interested in critical monographs. Although the essays address diverse issues connected to James and vary in size and scope, they all relate the story of the Jamesian experience. The introduction by Susan M. Griffin provides an excellent overview of the topics and pinpoints the focus of the writings succinctly. The organization of the articles follows no rigid theory and practice pattern as there is no such division applicable to the pieces strung here, yet a consistent focus on the creative process in the context of diverse Jamesian issues can indeed be traced whilst reading them in this sequence. If the reviewer has a grudge, it is about a dramatic absence

from this collection of Tóibín's non-fiction on James of his piece on *The Golden Bowl* and its film adaptation. This is the novel by James Tóibín favors most and the essay is a piece one would be delighted to read ("Scenes from a Life"). Nevertheless, the collection achieves its aim and provides students, scholars, and general readers with a fresh encounter with James's well-known texts.

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