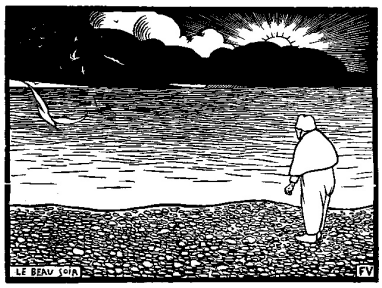
Life at the Core

Tim Parks
APRIL 7, 2011 ISSUE

The Empty Family
by Colm Tóibín
Scribner, 275 pp., $24.00



Here are nine stories, one set in London, five in Ireland, three in Spain, three focusing on women, six on men, one set in the nineteenth century, the rest more or less in the present, all but two ending in a stoically endured unhappiness expressed with Colm Tóibín's now familiar quiet and rhythmical delicacy. So dominant is the unhappiness, so exquisite the prose, that the reader cannot but wonder about the relationship between suffering and style.

"Silence," the opening story, is prefaced with an anecdote that Henry James recorded in a notebook as possible material for fiction. Discovering, only hours after his wedding, that his wife had previously been passionately in love with another man, an "eminent London clergyman" refuses to consummate the marriage but nevertheless spends the rest of his life with the woman. The cruelty and sadness of this situation work the more powerfully on the reader's imagination for being left unstated.

We then pass to the story's main character, Lady Gregory, a historical figure who, like Henry James, has been the object of Tóibín's admiring attention in the past.[1] Not as pretty as her older sisters, she married a man thirty-five years older than herself, achieving respectability but not happiness:

> In the night…as she tried to move towards him to embrace him fully, to offer herself to his dried-up spirit, she found that he was happier obsessively fondling certain parts of her body in the dark as though he were trying to find something he had mislaid.

Later, after the birth of a son, Lady Gregory had an affair with the highly politicized poet Wilfrid Scawen Blunt, a man whose "talents as a poet," in Tóibín's version of events,

> were minor compared to his skills as an adulterer. Not only could he please her in ways that were daring and astonishing but he could ensure that they would not be discovered.

This genius for deception is not entirely an advantage. Tóibín is convincing as he evokes the growing dismay of the person whose most intense and intimate relationship can never be acknowledged to others:

> The fact that it was not known and publicly understood that she was with him hurt her profoundly, made her experience what existed between them as a kind of emptiness or absence…. When the affair ended, she felt at times as if it had not happened.

This is what interests Tóibín, not just in this story, but throughout *The Empty Family*: how to respond to a painful sense of absence at the core of life, where family and belonging should be; how to avoid the feeling that there is no difference between "life now and the years stretching to eternity…in the grave."

Lady Gregory was resourceful. She wrote a cycle of love sonnets and convinced Blunt to publish it under his name, relishing the thought that people could read her story without knowing its source. When this subterfuge is not solace enough, she takes advantage of a moment at a dinner party to talk to Henry James. She cannot risk telling him the truth, but urgently needs to convey her unhappiness. So she invents, with the hope that he will rework it in a novel, the anecdote of the clergyman that we read at the opening of the story. It is not her life, but the aridity and sadness are hers.

That it was Lady Gregory who told James this anecdote is fact. That she was using it to refer indirectly to her own experience is perhaps Tóibín's intuition. In any event the implication is that fiction can offer a vehicle for expressing

what cannot easily be made public. To an extent it respects society's rules even as it seeks to find consolation for the pain they have caused. Indeed its creativity in finding "a new background…a new scenario" (James's words) that make expression possible is actually stimulated by those rules. The reader is invited to wonder, then, if Tóibín's story isn't itself a reformulation of circumstances and emotions its author may not wish to disclose, or if the story has been placed at the opening of the collection to make us speculate that all the stories here may have this function, since, as we saw with Lady Gregory, one reformulation is not enough; the need to express remains. We may even ask if the satisfaction of achieving an aestheticized expression of personal suffering does not preserve the pain by making it functional to the life of the sufferer turned artist.

The second story bears the book's title, "The Empty Family," and brings Tóibín closer to home and a possible alter ego. An unnamed, middle-aged, male narrator addresses himself to a former lover, also male. He has returned from life in California to his erstwhile home on the Irish coast, and after running into the ex-lover's brother and his wife is excited by the thought that "you must know that I am back here," though it seems there is no prospect of the two men renewing their relationship.

Tóibín is a master of literary tropes and very consciously seeks out images that deepen his themes and offer analogies of the way he works. The former lover's brother enthuses over a telescope he has bought and the narrator visits his coastal home to try it out. Here he focuses the telescope on the waves out at sea, which were "like people battling out there, full of consciousness and will and destiny and an abiding sense of their own beauty." He follows a single wave that

> had an elemental hold; it was something coming towards us as though to save us but it did nothing instead, it withdrew in a shrugging irony, as if to suggest that this is what the world is, and our time in it, all lifted possibility, all complexity and rushing fervour, to end in nothing on a small strand, and go back out to rejoin the empty family from whom he had set out alone with such a burst of brave unknowing energy.

Like the narrator and his telescope, fiction sees life in close detail, but from a safe distance, and everywhere transforms the particular into the universal. On meeting the son of the ex-lover's brother, the narrator remarks:

> He could have been you, or you when I knew you first, the same hair, the same height and frame and the same charm that must have been there in your grandmother or grandfather or even before, the sweet smile, the concentrated gaze.

In California the narrator had frequently visited lonely coastal landscapes the better to miss his Irish home, which is not only the empty house but also the graveyard where he himself will "eventually…lie in darkness as long as time lasts." In the meantime, "I will, if I have the courage, spend my time watching the sea, noting its changes and the sounds it makes." Like Lady Gregory, that is, who could hardly see any difference between her loveless life and eventual death, he will spend his time seeking out images that express his condition. He "will not fly even in my deepest dreams too close to the sun or too close to the sea. The chance for all that has passed." Thus the artistic impulse might seem to substitute for any return to life.

Is this satisfactory? The story ends with the narrator dreaming of purchasing a telescope "to focus on a curling line of water, a piece of the world indifferent to the fact that there is language, that there are names to describe things, and grammar and verbs." He is

> desperate to evade, erase, forget…to know at last that the words for colours, the blue-grey-green of the sea, the whiteness of the waves, will not work against the fullness of watching the rich chaos they yield and carry.

Now the sufferer seeks an escape from both the intensity of experience and its inadequate expression. Paradoxically, we feel sure he will want to write about this.

Having given us, in these two melancholy tales, a key to understanding his approach, Tóibín now offers seven rather richer stories, all variations on his theme, all calling to each other, reinforcing or undermining each other, like so many waves riding toward the shore, alike and individual. These are stories that need to be read together.

In "Two Women," Frances, a specialist in preparing film sets, returns in middle age from New York to her native Dublin to work on a film. Her cantankerous, overpurposeful manner is soon understood to be a strategy for surviving a life without intimacy. The actor who was her one great love, though never more than a lover, has been dead ten years and in any event had tired of her long before that, marrying a woman willing to focus on him rather than her work. Without close relationships of her own, Frances has installed a family from Guatemala, whom she employs to drive and

clean, in a small cottage on her property, enjoying with them a relationship of mutual respect and affection, but where she has total control.

In Ireland, which irks her because it recalls an idea of belonging that she feels neither here nor in the States (a common predicament for Tóibín's characters), she persuades the director whose film she is to work on to use colors more intense than those found in Ireland, thus creating an artificial, more beautiful world. In particular she is anxious about using the cluttered interior of a real pub for one scene. A studio mock-up would be so much easier to control and integrate with the rest. But the director insists; he wants the real thing. Stripping the pub bare in an attempt to make it manageable for the shoot, Frances is furious with two customers who will not leave, until she discovers that one of them is her ex-lover's widow.

If Tóibín himself sometimes seems a little too tightly in control of his material, a little too intent on pointing up colors and creating beautiful "literature," nevertheless it is a wonderful touch when he has Frances go to her car to put on makeup before confronting the woman who married the man she lost. She needs the protection of artifice.

Three of the remaining stories are particularly effective in coming at the book's themes of loss and dislocation from new angles. "The Pearl Fishers" has at its center a case of sex abuse by Catholic priests, something Tóibín has written about in these pages, explaining how, as a schoolboy, he knew and enjoyed the company of priests later accused of abuse.[2] Here, an unnamed narrator, author of popular thrillers and violent film scripts, reluctantly accepts a dinner invitation from two old friends, Donnacha and Gráinne, once his school debating partners. It was after a school debate that he and Donnacha had begun a homosexual liaison that lasted many years. But Donnacha was very much "part of the culture that produced him," a man with a "deep laziness or contentment" that allowed him to "tolerate" and "enjoy" his homosexual lover "until something more normal and simple moved into his ambit," which is to say Gráinne, his ambitious and forceful wife. The narrator's hardboiled fiction, like Frances's belligerence in the earlier story, would appear to be a defense mechanism in response to lost affection. "You're actually a big softie," Gráinne will remark over dinner.

About the time the adolescent affair with Donnacha began, the narrator went through a religious phase that saw him sitting in the study of priest and theologian Patrick Moorehouse, who encouraged him to read John Donne and Simone Weil, though, as the narrator acknowledges, "my fascination" was "entirely sexual." Often Gráinne would also come to these discussions and now, decades later, in the Dublin restaurant she explains that she has written a book denouncing Moorehouse for having abused her sexually. She has invited the narrator to dinner to ask for his corroboration.

Here, then, is another occasion where one who has suffered seeks expression. But the narrator, who was not abused, suspects that Gráinne is cashing in on the interest in priestly pedophilia and that her anger is a function of prima-donna ambitions. Meantime he has promised Donnacha that he will never reveal to Gráinne that they were lovers, a reticence he finds painful. The ensuing clash between a brash, self-serving political correctness and a wounded, defensively cynical sensitivity is excitingly dramatized, while at the structural level a story that may be imagined as a creative reformulation of real experiences balances one character who out of loyalty suppresses truth against another who exploits and magnifies her victimhood. Ironically, the lesson Moorehouse sought to teach both of them was to find "words to match our feelings," "working our doubts and fears into sentences."

"The New Spain" is another story of expatriation, return, and alienation from a family of origin. Pursued for her Communist activism, Carme fled Franco's Spain and spent eight years in London, living on handouts from her grandmother and idealizing her Barcelona childhood. She returns not immediately on Franco's demise but only after the death of her grandmother, who has bequeathed her considerable property to Carme and her sister, not their parents. Hence when Carme finds mother, father, and sister in their holiday home in Minorca, she is no longer the deplored rebel but the powerful owner.

Tóibín is skilled at turning clichés on their heads. Nostalgic and sentimental, Carme is upset that her father and mother have "spoiled" the old family home, developing cheap bungalows on the surrounding coastland, replacing olive trees with a swimming pool, selling off the grandmother's antique furniture. On the other hand her brusque response, repurchasing the furniture and threatening to reverse all the changes, is a declaration of war that will destroy all family feeling. She wants the house and its traditional Spanish charms, but "emptied of the people who might be in them." She wants to enjoy the all-night village festivities to celebrate San Juan, the folklore and the color, but when she picks up a man there and brings him home in the early hours, her intention is clearly to let her mother know that she does what she wants and will respect no one.

Again Tóibín invites us to distinguish between an action and the deeper sentiment that motivates it. However courageous and politically appropriate at the time, Carme's communism, we now suspect, like Gráinne's crusade for

the truth, was largely to do with a penchant for contrariness and grabbing the limelight. That said, the achievement of this story, which stands out as the most accomplished in the book, is that we can't help feeling a certain attraction to the feisty and destructive Carme. Perhaps the absence of a stoic sufferer of lost love demanding all our sympathy leaves us free to contemplate the story's intriguing complexities.

If Tóibín is ambitious in "The New Spain," offering in English a story with only Spanish characters who converse, one presumes, in Catalan, in "The Street" he is even more so, portraying the lives of Pakistani immigrants in Barcelona. Tóibín knows Barcelona and Catalan, but it's hard to imagine that he speaks Punjabi or Urdu. This then is the most radical formulation of "a new background…a new scenario," suggesting that the sentiment it deals with will be the most intense, the one that most needs to be held at a distance.

Newly arrived in Barcelona, Malik shares a room with seven other Pakistanis, and is uneducated, unloved, and without prospects. In this he resembles Eilis in *Brooklyn (2009)*, Tóibín's novel about a young Irish woman immigrating to the States in the 1950s. Albeit on a smaller scale, we have the same savoring of a simple, vulnerable life, and the same affectionately meticulous reconstruction of this person's world, his or her humiliations, slow accumulation of knowledge, and eventual coming of age. Under the brutal control of Baldy, a Pakistani who dominates him, Malik graduates from sweeping the floor of a barber's shop to selling phone cards and eventually mobile phones. Above all he discovers love.

Tóibín likes to describe men being gentle with each other, and his prose is at its best when he does so. Here is Henry James in *The Master (2004)*, caring for his sick brother Wilky:

> He went down to the hallway and sat close to Wilky, who was groaning softly. He moved closer to him…and held Wilky's hand for a moment, but since this seemed to cause him pain he withdrew it. He wished that his brother could smile as he had always smiled, but his drawn face now appeared as though it would never smile again.

And here is Malik taking care of Abdul, one of the older men in the room who has fallen ill:

> He knelt and gently opened the top of Abdul's pyjamas and whispered to him that he was going to sponge him with cold water. Abdul nodded slightly and lay quietly as Malik began to sponge his chest; then, having made him sit up, Malik took off the pyjama top and slowly sponged Abdul's shoulders and back. Abdul looked as though what was happening caused him mild pain.

But unlike *The Master*, this is a love story. Abdul is aroused. Tóibín spends fifteen patient pages inching the men closer together until their first lovemaking is interrupted by the homophobic Baldy, who beats them ferociously. Malik will spend a period in hospital and some time alone before the lovers are allowed a brief idyll sharing the same suffocating attic. Here, despite the younger man's evident involvement, Abdul is always a little distant and uneasy; when his cousin, Ali, arrives from Pakistan to share the room with them, we discover why: Ali has a photograph of Abdul with his wife and children.

Malik now seems set for that loss of love that has shaped the lives of Tóibín's other protagonists. But Abdul at last affirms his affection and insists that Malik return to Pakistan and live with him together with his wife, three children, and an extended family of brothers and cousins, some of whom have "friends who stay." Malik, who is never stupid, inquires:

> "Friends like me?"
>
> "No. But no one will think it strange that you are staying."
>
> "But your real family is your wife and your children?"
>
> Abdul looked away and was silent for a while. Then he whispered something that Malik could not catch.
>
> "What did you say?"
>
> "I said that my real family is you."

Here at last is a moment of optimism, not an empty family but a full one. Yet though the story closes with a tender account of the couple's day off together, the reader can't help but wonder if this family won't be rather too full. Is Tóibín really inviting us to imagine that Malik will be happy with Abdul and his wife in Pakistan? Is he suggesting, or simply wishing, that the extended family of an older culture might allow for a more satisfying emotional life? Or is

Malik heading for the distress Lady Gregory felt when her love could never be acknowledged, or more likely the misery that will follow when the relationship is discovered? One of the pleasures of reading Tóibín is our awareness of a disciplined and arduous balancing act between sentiment and intelligence, feeling and form. Nowhere is the balance more precarious or intriguing than at this, the collection's culminating moment.

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1 See his "Lady Gregory's Toothbrush," *The New York Review*, August 9, 2001. ↩

2 "The Cause that Called You," *The New York Review*, December 19, 2002. ↩