

Art, Politics and Memory: a Conversation with Colm Tóibín¹

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Abstract

The participation to a literary festival in Florence gave the interviewer the occasion to meet one of the most prolific and best loved Irish writers of our days. In what immediately took the shape and flavour of an informal and multifarious conversation – more than a strictly academic interview – Colm Tóibín, thus, shed an insightful light on his aesthetic beliefs and practice, but also on his political views, interest in current affairs and the impact of autobiography on his fiction. His relationship with John McGahern, one of the greatest twentieth-century Irish novelists, was also thoroughly addressed.

Keywords: Colm Tóibín, contemporary Irish fiction and history, fiction and autobiography, John McGahern, Ireland

In the rich and diverse panorama of contemporary Irish fiction, one of the outstanding names is that of Colm Tóibín (b. 1955). A trained historian and journalist before he became a creative writer, this Enniscorthy-born, eclectic artist published his first novel, *The South*, in 1990. Since then, five more novels (*The Heather Blazing*, 1992; *The Story of the Night*, 1996; *The Blackwater Lightship*, 1999; *The Master*, 2004; *Brooklyn*, 2009) and two collections of short stories (*Mothers and Sons*, 2006; *The Empty Family*, 2010) followed, alongside numerous critical essays and newspaper articles².

Given the praise and success of Tóibín's fiction with readers and reviewers worldwide, the almost complete absence of criticism around his work is striking and difficult to explain. Paul Delaney's 2008 edited collection of critical essays represents the only notable exception in the field of critical studies in recent Irish fiction³.

In tune with his fellow contemporary Irish writers, Tóibín investigates the recent past of the Irish Republic through a fictional evocation of his own childhood, relying heavily on autobiographical sources both as a basis and a backdrop for his work. While deconstructing the most ideologically

underpinned versions of that past, his fictional accounts of twentieth-century Ireland, thus, also update and expand stereotypical notions and traditional myths, such as family, home and motherhood, in a fluid and at times blurred relationship between fact and fiction.

His fictional personae strive against absent or emotionally distant mothers and unfulfilled desires, loss and illness, painful secrets and the heavy legacy of history and fierce political or religious fanaticism. Echoes and parallels connect his different works together and give the impression of a lively and cohesive fictional universe, through which the writer, tongue in cheek, makes us partake in a dimension which we end up perceiving as not merely fictive.

Different experiences conflate into, and concur in the creation of, Tóibín's distinctive and enchanting prose. His work as a literary critic and a travel writer, for example, surfaces in his novels and short stories both as a stylistic influence and as a thematic echo. His acute observation and reproduction of local idioms and landscapes arguably derives from his travels around Europe of the late '80s and early '90s and from the resulting travelogues (*Bad Blood: A Walk Along the Irish Border*, [1987] 1994; *Homage to Barcelona* [1990], 2002; *The Sign of the Cross: Travels in Catholic Europe*, 1994). These are especially noteworthy for their trenchant descriptions of the effects of sectarianism on people's everyday life and for the typically southern perception of the North as a geographically close, but otherwise very distant, almost alien, world.

The multiple settings of Tóibín's novels and short stories, ranging from Spain to Argentina, from the U.S. to the towns and coastal villages of South East Ireland, reflect the extensive travels that have constantly punctuated this authors' life. As for the commitment of many of his characters in politics and in the preservation of the nation's glorious past, again, the writer's personal experience plays an important part; his father's creation of a museum dedicated to local history in the Enniscorthy Castle is only one among other noteworthy instances of Tóibín's family's active participation in the community life.

That Tóibín's interest in history and in current affairs, and his involvement in the revisionist debate, have remained paramount throughout his career is something that emerges clearly from the events and protagonists of Irish, European and world history, which populate his pages side by side with fictional characters and fictional events. His focus on current issues, such as gay partnership, clerical paedophilia and global migration, can also be read in this light. His experience as an academic in the US and the UK, in recent years, must have helped him shape the disenchanting view of a cosmopolitan and globalized Ireland he expresses so subtly in his short stories.

Tóibín's writing is skilful and touching, his prose economical and understated, delicate and precise, austere but deeply suggestive and meaningful. The journalistic style of his fictional prose produces the effect of personal and direct testimony. At the same time, however, the legacy of the likes of

Henry James (the object of a long-lasting, passionate critical investigation) and Ernest Hemingway – admittedly among this writer’s major influences – can be detected in Tóibín’s and in his characters’ appreciation of silence and the unsaid, the unexplained, the barely suggested, reticence, omissions and ambiguity – all essential elements in his aesthetic practice.

The occasion for the conversation that follows was offered by Tóibín’s participation to a literary festival in Florence in June 2011. Besides offering a sharp view on some recent events, the writer explained his aesthetic views and practice, and provided an interesting insight into his personal and artistic bond to John McGahern.

Q: Colm, first of all, thank you so much for being here. I know you can speak Spanish. Can you speak Italian as well?

A: Sometimes not at all. It’s a really odd thing: sometimes you can get it entirely, sometimes nothing. You buy a newspaper and there is a big word and you have no idea what that word is.

Q: I was reading the piece you wrote a number of years ago when you stayed in Sicily and Berlusconi had just been elected for the first time: it sounds like you might have written it yesterday, it is amazing. So I was wondering if you have been following our “things”...

A: Following the “circus”?

Q: Yes...

A: I mean, it is extraordinary that a country known worldwide for its sophistication, you know, the image of Italians and how super-smart they are about everything, could vote for this man so many times, and everyone puts it down to the power of television, the power of wealth, the power of glitter. And it’s quite disturbing, you know. But the thing is, there is a wonderful, wonderful thing called ‘death’, and it’s moving towards him I think quite quickly [laughs] ...

Q: [laughs] Is that the only hope we have, do you think?

A: [laughs] You know, he will die or he will lose. Losing is what happens in democratic politics, you know, you get George Bush and then you get Obama. You never know, there might be somebody wonderful coming next.

Q: Let’s hope so. Speaking of Obama, did you happen to be in Ireland when he visited the country?

A: Yeah, I was in Ireland for the Queen, I mean, I met the Queen, but I have been there for both.

Q: I was there too and I was amazed at the amount of commotion that surrounded both visits and the Queen speaking a few words of Gaelic ...

A: I think this idea of celebrity, those two people being the closest thing we have to celebrity, the President of the United States and the Queen of England – I mean, there isn't anything bigger, they're in your dreams ...

Q: So this is how you would justify, so to say, what happened? I mean, I was there and, you know, Garret FitzGerald died a few days later, and I had the impression that after all the success Ireland had in the Celtic Tiger years, the affluence that the country experienced, and then the crisis – maybe it felt like people needed something to feel part of a bigger whole again, I don't know, from an outsider's perspective... Could that be a way of feeling "we are one and we are important, we can be successful again"?

A: I don't think it would have made any difference, I think if the Queen had come ten years ago it would have been the same, and Obama. But of course it wouldn't have been the same, because of course there was nothing else to celebrate going on, so it looked very exciting. Yes, it was amazing, I mean, people did feel good about both visits. I think Obama for Irish people – people in Ireland love a Democrat in the White House, they really do. It reminds me of Kennedy, and Clinton too, Clinton was huge in Ireland. A Democratic politician who has such a glamour attached to him... He's one of the beautiful people alive unless he's Jimmy Carter, but even Jimmy Carter...

Q: We mentioned the Celtic Tiger and recession. Do you think this phenomena will have an influence on Irishness? In The Heather Blazing you tackled some of the most crucial events of recent Irish history and how they somehow contributed to shaping Irishness, at least for a certain generation of Irish people. So I am wondering myself, and I wonder what you think about it, if more recent events will have as much of an impact as Independence or ... like Ireland finally becoming important internationally, or wealthier than it would have been in the past, and then very quickly going back to people not being able to pay for their mortgages, losing their jobs, immigrants leaving the country only a few years after their arrival, emigration being again a possibility for young people in Ireland ... These events that happened so quickly but were so radical, do you think that, in ten or twenty years' time, they will be looked at as something major? Or do you think that they will pass away as quickly as they arrived?

A: I think it's hard to judge. Some novelists will write about it, just as Roddy Doyle, say, was writing about immigration, and say Anne Enright's

new novel, which is out now, I mean, she is describing the bust. And then there are other novelists who won't write about it. I don't think Sebastian Barry will write about it, for example, because that's not what he does. Or John Banville. And I might mention it, but it won't be important for me, because the novel I am writing I started writing in 2000, and I wasn't thinking about the boom or bust. I am interested in psychology, but obviously psychology lives in society. It is as if you're making a painting: the world of now might appear in the distance, but it wouldn't appear in the face. And I'd be careful about it, because there is always pressure on you to say "Why don't you write about...?". I am really busy thinking about something, but it's so far back from now, and because I've been a journalist I sort of know the excitement of now is always there. And I have friends who say "But your novel is – how can you be in the middle of something and ...". Like I've written a novel about Henry James in the middle of the most exciting time for Ireland, with all the changes. As I worked, I had no interest in them at all. None.

Q: And does fiction work as a sort of way out for you from everything else, or is it just a parallel activity to non-fiction writing?

A: I think you've got to make it into a reasonably pure space where rhythms matter as much as ideas and where images matter as much as, say, public affairs, so therefore when the reader puts the book down larger questions to do with life or death, or how people behave, are there in the foreground. But it doesn't mean you ignore everything that's going on, it doesn't mean you have to make your characters set in ancient Greece. The territory that John Banville works in is a very pure territory, which is almost not penetrated by any idea of now. But I suppose in what I do, I would allow a door into the contemporary, but I would be very very careful that the space is kept reasonably air-conditioned, like, there would be a few mosquitoes wandering about, but not too many [smiles].

Q: You mentioned the image. I have been working on John McGahern, and the idea of the image as the starting point of artistic creation was central for him. How does it all start for you? Or does it always start in the same way? Would you have, like he had, an image that was obsessing him and that he had to get rid of, so that's how he claimed he started to write?

A: Yeah, I mean, I know that beautiful thing he wrote about the image and it is true in his work when you think about it. The car seat, there was a chair in *Amongst Women*, for example; that image, of Moran sitting in that chair. Or you can think about other images in his work. And there were two interesting things about him. I was going to Edinburgh, and he said to me "Oh, Edinburgh, marvellous, the National Gallery of Scotland has that beautiful Velázquez of the old woman frying eggs", he said. "Go and look

at that.” For him those early Velázquez paintings had something in them, in the way, say, ceramics were painted, or a hand or a face, that would give him something. And the other thing he said was that he would give about a hundred Picassos for one Juan Gris: it is so precise, there is no untidiness, everything is almost mathematically pure in Gris. I think John really did try and work with ideas of line and purity in narrative, and also sort of plainness. In those early Velázquez paintings there is no big flourish in people’s clothes, it is almost... the colours are all muted and grey. I think John liked the idea of minor keys, grey colours, muted colours, bring everything down and you get the maximum of expression from the minimum of means. And he cared very deeply about that, and he could write probably the best plain sentences of anyone. He could do things like “she did not want him to go that morning”. For some reason that sentence would have a lift, a glow, a sort of interior rhythm, which meant that it was way higher than its own occasion suggested. And he, very interestingly, was tone deaf and I think this is significant, that he had to find rhythms that didn’t come automatically to him. He didn’t have a singing voice, he couldn’t even hear music, he would hear it as noise. He liked very little of what he read and he tended to read the same things over and over, often just for something in the style that he liked. But if it was ever too much, if he could see something looking for its effect, he would drop it, he would suspect that it was too much, you know. And he also had an enormous, enormous interest in gossip, enormous. If he was here now he would be interested in who exactly your boyfriend was, how you met. And then he would remember it, “oh, that fellow who ...”, or some detail. He was a born novelist in that sense, remembering tiny details about people.

Q: And you can get that passion for local news, from reading his works.

A: Yes, and he would make – if he was here he would have already created a small local thing about one bar that he liked, or one drink that he liked, or one man that he spoke to in a bar and he would remember what the man said to him in the bar. There are many many ways of interpreting John McGahern, and I think that section on the image is very exalted compared to what I think a lot of his work arose from, which was hurt, personal wound, that he was working out of. But he needed of course to find an artistry, or he needed to find an artistic system not to write mere flat complaint about his childhood. So he had to find a sort of theory, and it is interesting that he did that.

Q: He always rejected the idea of art as self-expression, or of his own art as pure autobiography. Like when you read Memoir ...

A: Yeah, he was very careful about that, and he was very odd because, I mean, there it was. In other words, there were times when, even in private

conversation, I even could ask him eventually – I wouldn't have done that at the beginning – if scenes in books were real or invented. In, for example, *That They May Face the Rising Sun*, I knew most of those stories, and I knew most of the people. So I said to him one night, you know that scene with Jimmy Joe McKiernan, the IRA man, I said to him “Did you...?” and he looked at me and said “No, no. I invented that conversation” – meaning that some of the things around it were not invented. And certainly with *Amongst Women* there it all was, I mean, you know, that was his story. I think he is almost unique in that respect. It is hard to think of another novelist that you could find him and his story in what? five novels? In the five novels and all the short stories there is his story and there is almost nothing else. So his job was to lift that. But I can't think of another novelist... Saul Bellow, perhaps, who operated only out of experience, and when you find a scene in a book you would discover, by accident sometimes, when I was talking with John, I would realise he was telling me a story that was from one of the books.

Q: *When I read Memoir, well, some events in his own life were well known...*

A: Well, the business of the clock, of going outside with the clock, it looks like cut and paste to me – he couldn't cut and paste, because he couldn't use a computer, but the scene with the child who knows at what time his mother will be buried...

Q: *It is almost word for word.*

A: Absolutely, word for word. And I have come across that three times in Irish writing. I am going to give a lecture on this in the McGahern school in July. William Carleton does it, in his autobiography, which he writes later, after *Wildgoose Lodge*, and he gives the same story. Aidan Higgins does it: the burial of the mother in *Balcony of Europe* becomes word for word ten pages, he must have actually cut it out and pasted it with scissors, in his own autobiography; he just changed the name back to his name. And John did the same in *Memoir*. I am trying to think about what it means, because I can't find it anywhere else.

Q: *And it's kind of funny that someone who was always so careful to specify that he wasn't writing his own story, that then he would publish something like Memoir, which is overtly an autobiography and which in some sections reproduces parts from his fiction. So one comes to wonder: is he lying now that he is telling his autobiography? Or is he making fun of us readers and critics ...*

A: What I think is that certain experiences, if described in fiction, solidify within the self much more than if they were merely experienced. They were

not merely experienced: they were experienced, then they were transmuted into art, and in doing that they solidified within the self and became truer than they were before. So that you cannot proceed within the *Memoir* without putting that in, because it was much more fundamentally part of your experience because you'd used it artistically. It's a very very strange idea.

Q: *I guess that applies to your own works also ...*

A: It does, except that I won't write a memoir, I mean, I hope I won't write a memoir. Although, to tell the truth, I have started... but I think I know the difference between what happened and what I wrote... but maybe I don't.

Q: *So we'll never have a way of... [laughs]*

A: [laughs] No. No, I won't write one of the memoirs blaming my parents. And I wonder if John would have written a memoir, had he not been ill, or had he not found the letters between his father and his mother, had all of that not come to him like that. But, you know, some see that this book is a mistake, giving the game away. It's sort of lovely, I mean, it's a wonderful idea that you can sort of pull the curtains back and say "Ah, ok, let the light in".

Q: *And if you forget for a moment that it's a memoir, it could very well be one of his works of fiction.*

A: Oh yes, it's very well written. It's a fascinating idea. You know Borges' *Pierre Menard*? It's a story where Pierre Menard writes *Don Quixote*, and he writes it in the 20th century, but it's word for word the same as Cervantes, but of course it's an entirely different book, because it's written three centuries later. It's an elaborate literary game, it's word for word the same, no change, but Borges analyzes the difference between the two texts, he puts the section from Cervantes and the section from Menard together. They are exactly the same, but he analyzes the difference between them, because of course if you wrote that book three hundred years later it would be different. Anyway, have a look at that story, because it really conveys that idea of two passages that are the same and also different, and in this case one piece is presented to you as artistry, as fiction, and the second time it's presented to you as true. And the second time you wonder how...

Q: *Another thing about John McGahern is that there are people, characters, places that recur continually, so you feel like it's a familiar universe.*

A: Yeah, Luke Moran, the name Luke Moran happens in *Korea* for the first time, so it's not the same character, because it couldn't be, because he

comes back in a coffin from Korea, but it's the same name. The same trees, the same houses, the same shadows. Yes, it's extraordinary.

Q: *In your own works we do come across little details, not as much...*

A: Yeah, but you are not meant to notice [laughs].

Q: *[laughs] But say that I did notice, I would be tempted to ask you: was that intentional?*

A: Yes, yes, and it's going to happen more. So it's a sort of beginning of something; in other words, in *Brooklyn* you realise that the wedding she was at in Ireland is the wedding of the people who are in the story *The Name of the Game*. There is a story called *The Name of the Game*, in *Mothers and Sons*. Well, if you look at the names it's all the people from *Brooklyn*, the people from Enniscorthy in *Brooklyn* are all twenty years later in *The Name of the Game*. So, that's one example. Certainly there is a *South-to-Heather Blazing* connection. Also, the people who visit in *Brooklyn* include the grandmother and her sister from *The Heather Blazing* ...

Q: *There are names also from The Heather Blazing that we find in some stories, the Redmonds ...*

A: Yeah.

Q: *A Nancy Brophy, I think ...*

A: Oh yes, very good. Nancy Brophy is in *A Priest in the Family* and in the new book, in the story called *The Colour of Shadows*. But in the novel I am working on they are all going to come in. I can't quite get the people from Henry James in, I can't get the people from *The Story of the Night* in. But they are like two orphan children, they are the two orphan books that I probably shouldn't have written.

Q: *Is there an attempt then to build a sort of 'big work' that comprises all your works?*

A: No, it's not as much as... It's almost for good luck, bring them in just for that, it's not an attempt to create a sort of *roman fleuve*, a sort of bigger picture book, these are very small books in their scope, and you are putting that in almost for good fortune, but it is not with a larger scope in mind, it's almost mystery, it's almost, "Oh, I could just do this".

Q: *And it is not as visible as in McGahern.*

A: Yes, but it is going to become more visible. But it is not to try and create a bigger canvas, it's really not.

Q: *As far as themes are concerned, the relationship between mothers and their sons recurs insistently and crucially: that has been the case since your very first novel and all the way through to your latest short stories [including the recent collection of essays, *New Ways to Kill Your Mother* (2012)].*

A: Yes, I think that if you go back to everything, you can probably trace me. A few times I had to say to people: "Don't read all the books, just read one or two". Because if you read all the books you get a picture which I'd rather not give. You know, it is very clear, there are so many images of abandonment, so many, that you would have to say: "What happened to you to cause all this?". Well my job is, I suppose, to say "I don't want to say", but it is absolutely clear, there it is. Isn't it?

Q: *I suppose it is. I found it interesting, reading different reviews of *The Empty Family*, that many of them agreed in saying that through those stories you set out to 'update' the received stereotypes about Irish motherhood and mothers. I wonder, is that something that one does intentionally, to sit down and say: "I am going to write stories about mothers now and show people that, even though they have read a lot of stories about good mothers and unhappy children, it is not always and necessarily that way?"*

A: No, I am not interested in charting changes in the society, but I suppose I am interested in battling literary stereotypes and clichés. Therefore you are working with a character and a scenario, and what you do is give yourself enough time and space so that that character is interesting and has twists and ways of being that are interesting, and that scenario is dramatic and not filled with an obviousness which would bore the reader, so you are working. And if you are working, you are trying to think a) of ways of not boring the reader, and b) ways of interesting the reader. Therefore you are not charting the changes in a society as much as wrong-footing the reader, saying something that is both unexpected and inexplicable psychologically and seeing if you can work with that. So you are moving very deliberately, but with the psychology or the scenario, rather than the society. So, I am not interested in types or manners, I am interested in that moment in that story when someone does something and the reader asks: "Oh, that's completely foolish, why doesn't she do this?" Some of the stories take years, they just stop in the middle, like *The Name of the Game* and *Two Women* and it takes me a year or two to find a way out of the story. With *Two Women* I have the dates for that, I think it took five years. But something like *A Journey* or *A Song* took a week, or maybe even less, just for some reason that one came all in its own.

Q: *Do you re-write a lot?*

A: I write in long-hand and then I type, and then I work on that. But no, I don't, in the sense that I try and get the first draft right, and it doesn't mean I do, but I don't start again. Once I get an opening, that's the opening, generally, often not the first paragraph; I write the first paragraph, and it's often just wrong and I leave it and look at it, and then I rest and just cut it out and I just start again below it and maybe try an opening another time and another time. Then once you have it, just then work, and try and work as though you will never get a chance again. You end up, however, re-writing quite a lot and cutting quite a lot.

Q: *I find it very interesting, the idea that Hemingway had of saying very little, that is, of writing very little, to say a lot.*

A: Yes, that lesson from Hemingway is an amazing one. Writing becomes a problem for you sometimes, because you are getting the essence of something by feeling it and then writing it down so that you feel it is communicated in the rhythm, or somehow it is there, and if you add to that or subtract from it much you may be actually doing a lot of damage to it. It doesn't mean you don't cut words or paragraphs, but you are trying to get that feeling down.

Q: *Well it's interesting the way that you – or at least this is what happened to me – that if I re-read the same story or the same passage from a novel several times, every time something different would come out of the same sentences.*

A: Some of them would come out at an awful lot of levels of feelings that are concealed almost as much as disclosed.

Q: *Yes, I felt that way particularly for *The South*, in the parts after Miguel's death.*

A: Yes, *The South* took so long to write and I was so bottled up, I had not done any therapy yet, and a lot of things seemed so unclear to me... so there are a lot of things in *The South*. I haven't looked at the book for years – I wouldn't want to, God! [laughs].

Q: *Is there still a connection with Spain?*

A: Yes, I mean, I have a house there, and I do a lot of work in that house, because it is up there in the Pyrenees, it's the village of *The South* and there is no shop or bar or restaurant in the village, so you wake in the morning and you work. I often work two or three times a day – long stretches. So out of all that

I got *A Long Winter*. That's the story I am probably happiest with, formally, in terms of its structure and tone, but that, again, came out of being in the village so much, and hearing part of the story, and getting to work on it and thinking about it. So it's all there. And also the story at the end of *The Empty Family*, *The Street*, also came out of hanging about in Barcelona, looking at things. But I can't see another novel coming from it, though you can never judge.

Q: Based on your knowledge of Spain, what is your opinion on the economic crisis that is currently afflicting that country? How do you think it will affect their cultural production? What about the parallel that many draw between Spain and Ireland and their rapid swaying from boom to bust and bailout?

A: Yes, they had a building boom, a sort of fizzing in the national blood around consuming and buying and borrowing money. Their bankers were fools and their politicians dim-witted. Just like Ireland. But it's hard to know about the arts. A poem can come in a day, a painting in a week, a novel just needs paper and a pen and some time. But I would not like to try to raise money to make a film in Ireland or Spain just now.

Q: What influence would you say did your experience in the States have on you, in terms of style, if any, or themes?

A: I think it's had an enormous influence in two ways: one, that it is very solitary and lonely, even New York. I mean, I have got no interest in New York, like other people do, I just find it isolating and just... brutal, so my life indoors there is more important than anything else, I am not interested in American culture. I tend to be on my own a lot and I see a lot of people I don't know very well, so going back home to Ireland is good, and spending time in Spain also... Also, I like New York because I have been teaching there. Teaching has never been boring for me. I probably came to it so late in the day, I only started teaching in 2006, so I was 51, and it was like going back to college but better equipped somehow to study. I do an awful lot of research, and I teach English Literature in the English department at Columbia. It means I formulate certain theories for the students based on what I know from intense reading and thirty years' writing. I end up taking it all in myself. What I say in class may affect me more than it does the students... I am teaching a course on Jane Austen, for example, so you end up learning quite a lot, you don't realize the amount which you are learning.

Q: As far as accents are concerned, there does not seem to be a great deal of them in your fiction, I mean, trying to write down on the page the way people write, or at least not as much as in some other writers – I am thinking again of John McGahern, or Claire Keegan...

A: Are you sure? 'Cause I would think that if you read *The Blackwater Lightship* you are dealing with three particular voices: the old woman, who tends to have a more local idiom, her daughter, less so, and the granddaughter, not at all, so that you are putting the three against each other. So if you are working with three actresses, I mean, I know they made a movie out of this, but they weren't interested in this for the movie, but if you were working with Irish actresses, they would start with one of them talking a much more Wexford way, the old woman, her daughter less and the granddaughter not at all. I think in *Brooklyn* those figures, I mean, the mother in *Brooklyn*, would have a complete way of talking that anyone in Enniscorthy would recognize as fundamentally from Enniscorthy. And *The Name of the Game* would have some of that going on too. So in some stories that is the case and in others it is just completely neutral. But the main protagonists tend to be, yes, absolutely neutral, in other words, in *The Heather Blazing* Eamon Redmond does not have a local idiom, he could equally be – he couldn't be Australian, but he is Irish in a way that he is East-coast, it is Dublin...

Q: *Yes, but the story is very local, on the contrary, in terms of places...*

A: Yes, you are absolutely right about that, there is absolutely no local idiom in the dialogue in his case. Let me think, in *The Heather Blazing* Helen wouldn't have any of it, and in *Brooklyn* Eilis probably has none of it either, because I am using someone who is almost like myself, deracinated from... just movement, travel, radio or whatever. But the older ones have it.

Q: *So it is more connected with the types of characters than with anything else?*

A: Yes.

Q: *Another thing that comes up a lot is history, of course. Is your interest in history now the same as it was when you started to write fiction? And would you say that history plays a huge part in your fiction, as a character itself, and in terms of providing versions of history, possibly?*

A: Yeah, I mean, when I was in university I did a degree in English and History, but the real interest I had was in History. I see myself trained as a historian in ways that I don't see myself trained in literature, you know, and that training is about a number of things. It is about what to do with the detail; how to write historical narrative; how to build a picture; accuracy, emotional accuracy; or if you are reading a document from the 17th century, that you know what such documents were, who wrote that, what such term would have meant then. So yes, all of that way of trying to imagine yourself in another landscape, courtesy of language, that I care about that, and I am

often happier in the company of people who are historians rather than people who are, say, novelists [laughs].

Q: And what about those historical figures that actually appear in your works? Like Haughey, or de Valera... do they just serve the purpose of verisimilitude, or is there something else too?

A: Again, it is a 'put-in-for-good-fortune'. And, I mean, the figure of Haughey loomed so large in people's imagination in those years that certainly we were in those hotels in Dublin, the Shelbourne, the Russell, and Fianna Fáil figures would come in and out of those hotels, and my family would say: "Oh, look at them!", so they had glamour and distance and all of that. So, yeah, that is actually what happened in those years, that if you went into those buildings, you were up from the country, and you were a certain class of people, they loved going into those hotels and have tea and look around, and anyone would come in, they would eat them up from TV or something and [pretends to whisper some comment], it's a country thing. So Haughey appears in *The Heather Blazing* as a sort of country thing, of 'country people in Dublin' – "Look at him, look at him!" And de Valera, I mean, I saw – I have a photo of my father in exactly that place in Enniscorthy on the platform – I shouldn't be telling you this – with de Valera. And my father certainly spoke into a mike. I mean, he is not Eamon Redmond, but some of him is. But de Valera is on the platform, and he is exactly in that space, and it is probably exactly that year [laughs].

Q: And what about the North? You deal with it in your travelogues, but less so in your fiction. Have you followed the peace process, and do you have a view on it?

A: I take an interest in it, of course. It is both my country and not my country. For example, John McGahern and I never discussed the North, we would never have bothered.

Q: I suppose you shared what we could call a Southern perspective.

A: We never made jokes about this; John was very very serious about this. Two societies had developed completely separate, and he liked the border, he liked the difference, and he liked going over to Enniskillen in the North. But he also felt both sorry about it being very sectarian and difficult. But when he came across fierce republicanism, for example, he found it very offensive and odd, he never trusted it or believed in it. And he would love saying to me regularly that we have nothing to do with them, we don't have their hatreds, we don't feel them. So therefore he didn't write about the North at all, even though he lived very close to the North and went to the North once a week, he was in Enniskillen once a week, his bank was in Enniskillen, for example.

He liked my first book, the *Bad Blood* book, I think, more than he liked my other books, or, I am never sure, but it was a way of annoying me to tell me that he did. In my fiction – I couldn't see the North as a fictional space, I couldn't work with it. There are a few moments, like in *The Heather Blazing* when they put some IRA man in jail, but it's reflected only in the way it affected the South. I just had an idea as a journalist that I could do that journey in 'bad blood' and I did it, but very much as an outsider, I mean, people in the North were offended by the book, because they said: "You write like an anthropologist or an outsider, you have no sympathy." The idea of hatred like that between two groups of people is utterly alien to me, I don't know it, it's not my country. I knew more about it than I would know about the border between Serbia and Croatia, but I was as puzzled by it ...

Q: *So it's like a foreign place?*

A: Yes, a foreign place that you also sort of know, so it's also curious.

Q: *And maybe more foreign for that very reason?*

A: Yeah.

Q: *As far as genres are concerned, do you feel more at ease with the novel or with the short story form?*

A: You see, I couldn't write short stories at the beginning, and I really did try, so I have a number of short stories from the '70s and '80s. The only one of them which survived was one called *A Journey*, that's the first piece of fiction that I wrote that's in print, I wrote it in 1979 when I was 24. I lost all the other stuff, just moving flats and so. I couldn't write short stories, they were awful. Then when I got the idea of *The South* I could work with a bigger canvas and I was very very surprised to find eventually that – I think the first was *A Priest in the Family* – that I could find a way of using this new form, and I like this new form. I think what I like is a sort of length that is like 15,000-20,000 words or so. And there is something really important about this: the novel has become immensely commercial, even novels that are not commercial in themselves; publishers want them, they are sort of commercial entities. A short story is almost worthless, so if you write it you realize that it is a complete waste of your time, so it is very pure work, it is lovely. I mean, «The New Yorker» could take one or two of them, but like one story a year. I really like the form, and I suppose I could go on with it. So at the moment I have about three short stories – first pages – written, and I have about 40,000 words of a novel. I was just thinking the other day that I would really like to have spent some of that time on short stories, and I'd be happier in some ways.

Q: *So your next work might be a collection of short stories?*

A: The publisher will go nuts, if that's the case [laughs].

Q: *Can you tell us anything more specific about that?*

A: In October, a short novel called *The Testament of Mary* will be published. Mary is the mother of Jesus, and it is her story. I am almost finished a long novel set in Enniscorthy between 1968 and 1971. And I have four new short stories, plus a screenplay I wrote with the German director Volker Schlöndorff, which is a comedy set in New York. My first comedy.

Q: *Would you share the view that there is a distinctive and widespread realist trend in contemporary Irish fiction, as opposed to more experimental practices in other literatures in English of the same years?*

A: I talk about that in my introduction to *The Penguin Book of Irish Fiction...* Well, yes. The only problem I have with that is with the word 'Realism'. I have no interest in Realism, I mean, none whatsoever. I am interested in rhythm; my aim is to – underneath the sentence – have something that's going on, that will actually give you the meaning or the significance or the import of what's actually being said. If you write for example: "He came in the door as she went out. They passed one another. They glanced for a second at each other and then went on". In a thriller or in a television news report that merely signifies what it says, but I have no interest in that, none whatsoever. The only interest I have is in what you can bury in the rhythm of that, so the reader doesn't quite know where the feeling is coming from, where the levels of feeling are coming from. So I am talking about something which is much closer to the poetic – by poetic I mean where language has resonance, where the sound of a word does as much work as the actual meaning of that word. I am not talking about what language means, but about what language does. So I am talking about a form of action, in which a great deal is concealed, and in which the sentence is not merely declarative and on its way to the next place. So that is probably something that makes its way into our tradition in the most strange ways by very odd translations of Turgenev and Chekhov, or indeed certain moments in Flaubert, and made its way into Ireland strangely, and appeared in the works of, say, Joyce, in the stories of Mary Lavin, and made its way around them into America in the works of someone like Raymond Carver, who then in turn has had an enormous influence back on Ireland. It is a type of prose, in all these cases, which has a sort of shiver of movement; it's almost like a Velázquez composition, where it's not photo-realism, it's filled with paint and the mystery of paint.

Q: *There is a strong visual element.*

A: Yes, but I am talking about the material, which is language, being essential to the finished product, that this was 'made' with language, it's not merely language as information, it's language as almost something fluid and apparent, that is there. So I am not talking about Realism, I am talking about something that arises from song, prayer, the poetic in Irish prose much more than in the work of some English novelists. I am much more aware that it is a very different language; I very much enjoy English fiction, but it's brisk, it's informative, the sentences are declarative and clear. But I don't find that in John McGahern; his is a distinct form, in other words it's very hard to describe, it is a genre.

Q: *Would you reckon that there is an influence also, in terms of musicality and rhythm, at least, of the Gaelic tradition?*

A: Yes.

Q: *And oral storytelling?*

A: I am not so sure about oral storytelling, because both John and myself come out of silence as much as we did out of speech, things not said, people sitting around saying nothing. And there was no storyteller. I mean, if you are brought up in a barracks or, like I was, in a teacher's house, you know, there was no one telling stories like that. You keep things to yourself. So I'd be very uneasy about that idea of oral, as much as, yes, I think what's significant there is what Mr Rooney says to Mrs Rooney in Beckett's play *All That Fall*, where he says to her: "You sound like you are talking a dead language", and she says: "Well, it will be dead in time, just like our own dear Gaelic". And that idea that language will probably go and fade is somewhere at the basis of what I am talking about, that we do not own language, we have a loan of it. It came and it will go. It wasn't always there. But I am not sure about that. I am not certain about the musicality, the oral, or the uncertainty; but I do know that when I read – Beckett has it, Dermot Healy has it, Claire Keegan has it, certainly the plays of Tom Murphy also – I am really alert to it, something beneath the sentences, or around them, that's almost like incantation, or the language of prayer.

Claudia Luppino: *Well, thank you so much, I really appreciate it.*

Colm Tóibín: Good luck with your work!

My gratitude goes to Colm Tóibín for his most generous support to my research project and for his friendliness.

Notes

¹This is an edited version of my conversation with Colm Tóibín that took place in Palazzo Strozzi, Florence, on 17 June 2011. This text has very kindly been revised and approved by the author.

²For a complete and up-to-date bibliography of Colm Tóibín's works see his official website, <www.colmtoibin.com>.

³Paul Delaney (ed.), *Reading Colm Tóibín*, The Liffey Press, Dublin 2008.