Dissent and Dislocation in Colm Tóibín's *The Story of the Night*

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Abstract
Colm Tóibín's *The Story of the Night* (1996) articulates dissent from the nationalist vision of Ireland as an insular nation and challenges the origins of a nationalist state by negotiating the social, political, historical, cultural and religious limits assigned within the nation. Yet Tóibín's writings demonstrate how crossing the limits imposed by politics, religion, history and culture, and moving within, and beyond, the margins can be both empowering and debilitating. Although proposing a way beyond insular representations of Ireland, there is an implicit suggestion within the novels of Colm Tóibín of a need for some form of rootedness to counter the sense of disunity that seems prevalent when the central ideologies of Church and State are challenged.

> ... how vulnerable the land here was to change, how the sand levels shifted each year. (Tóibín 1992, 206)

The sense of dislocation evoked by this description of the landscape in Colm Tóibín's *The Heather Blazing* reverberates throughout Irish fiction, yet the process of destabilization, whilst problematic, is also a source of power for Irish writers.[1] A period of economic, political and cultural stagnation after independence has been followed first by tentative, then substantial change during the last thirty years.[2] A diverse range of factors, such as entry into the EEC, increasing urbanization and industrialization, conflict between the Church and State on issues including divorce, homosexuality and contraception, and an escalation of violence in the North have challenged the nationalist vision of Ireland as an insular nation.[3] As the ideological boundaries of politics, religion and culture are contested by conditions within, and beyond, Ireland Irish writers are able to create imaginative spaces in which concepts of identity, community and nationality can be explored and redefined.[4] Ngugi wa Thiong'o, the Kenyan novelist, addresses the difficulties faced by the post-colonial/post-independence writer and perceives any such shift positively:

> Moving the centre in the two senses—between nations and within nations—will contribute to the freeing of world cultures from the restrictive walls of nationalism, class, race and gender. In this sense, I am an unrepentant universalist. For I believe that while retaining

> its roots in regional and national individuality, true humanism with its universal reaching out, can flower among the peoples of the earth.... (1993, xvii)

Ngugi's belief that shifting the centre can be a source of freedom does not seem to take full account of the power of "the restrictive walls of nationalism, class, race and gender", or the security they may provide, yet does suggest a need for a collective cultural identity and rootedness. Terence Brown, in speculating on the future for a post-nationalist Ireland, also highlights the importance of communal identities but is more guarded about "humanistic values" which he suggests are "a fragile dyke against the cultural and social depredations of a rampant commercialism in an Ireland which could lose, before long, any distinctive identity it may once have possessed" (1985, 325).

Colm Tóibín's *The Story of the Night* (1996) reflects a newly perceived sense of freedom within an Ireland emerging from the legacy of a nationalist republican state.[5] Yet, in striving for a more inclusive sense of the world, his novel acknowledges the need for communal belonging that is separated from the past. It registers the paradox of the restrictive security that nationalism provides along with an awareness that the future for a post-nationalist state depends upon an abandonment of its limiting prejudices. Benedict Anderson effectively highlights the limitations of a homogeneous model in his definition of the nation as "an imagined political community" that is "both inherently limited and sovereign" (1991, 6), yet he does not underestimate its power:

> It is imagined as a community because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship. (1991, 7)

Although nationalism has the ability to unify disparate elements, often empowering the nation within a struggle to decolonize, the unifying power of nationhood largely depends upon a fixed set of identifications. It is this fixity that, inevitably, leads to the marginalization and alienation of minority groups who may be excluded from the national imagination on the basis of politics, class, gender, race, religion and sexual orientation. Homi K. Bhabha suggests that the nation is only able to define itself in terms of opposition and exclusion and proposes that this 'imagined community' is, paradoxically, reliant on "the minority, the exilic, the marginal and emergent" (1990, 300). He perceives the limitations of nationalisms as empowering, proposing that "Boundaries become a place from which something begins its presencing" (1994, 5). This echoes the "universal reaching out" of Ngugi's view, yet does not appear to acknowledge a reaching in to the centre of ideological control, which seems almost an inevitable part of the process of cultural exchange.

Such a process could take various forms: the marginal could define itself in opposition to the national community; it could rue its marginalization and seek to join the nation; or the nation could be forced to expand its terms to include it.

Bhabha's enigmatic "something" that avows its presence in the work of Colm Tóibín is a counter-discourse that challenges the monolithic discourse of the nation. His writings attempt to release the marginalized from the restrictions of a patriarchal, nationalist discourse that is inextricably linked with Catholic institutional power.[6] Traversing boundaries, whether geographically, psychologically or imaginatively, intimates an excentric sense of freedom as the social, political, historical, cultural and religious limits assigned within the nation are renegotiated. However, any simplistic notion of a liberating autonomy, promised by dissent and subversion, can be delusory as one set of enclosures is invariably replaced by another. Tóibín's novels demonstrate that moving within, and beyond, the margins can be both empowering and debilitating.

The earlier novels of Colm Tóibín reflect the present generation's disillusionment with the ideology of a nationalist state and explore the conflicts that arise when its legacy is rejected. Katherine Proctor, the Anglo-Irish Protestant protagonist of his first novel, *The South* (1990a), is a marginal figure who feels estranged from the Catholic and Protestant communities within Ireland. She retreats into self-imposed exile in Europe in an endeavour to escape the sectarian divisions that she cannot comprehend.[7] Katherine Proctor manifests an absence of maternal feeling, abandoning her son with little regret. Thus, the pressures of the past intrude upon future generations, creating an emotional vacuum. Similarly, Eamon Redmond, the protagonist of *The Heather Blazing* (1992), is a judge who suffers the death of both parents during his childhood and develops into an insular, self-sufficient individual. His sense of family history is entwined with Irish history:

> At times, he felt that he had been there, close by, when his grandfather was evicted, and that he had known his father's Uncle Michael, the old Fenian, who was too sick to be interned after 1916. (61)

Eamon Redmond's narrative contains oblique references to the national narrative in which the execution of the radical Republican leadership in 1916 was followed by the development of a conservative, bourgeois state, which iconized them. Eamon Redmond is haunted by the past yet, to a certain extent, attempts to distance himself from history. Within fractured relationships between parents and children there appears an expression of a desire to connect, or reconstitute the bonds of family and, paradoxically, a desire to escape its confining presence.

The Story of the Night also examines the tensions between the past and present, between the individual and family, between the public and private, along with their attendant ambivalence. Tóibín gives a voice to another marginalized figure through the first person narration of Richard Garay,[8] an English/Argentinian gay, living in Argentina, whose emerging sexuality is mirrored by an emerging political consciousness. This focalization process constructs a singular perspective through which the narratives of other characters are mediated and produces a discourse that subverts the dominant authoritarian discourse of the political community defining the nation, although always acknowledging its power. The characterization of Richard Garay presents a concept of identity that is heterogeneous.[9] However, whilst identity is plural, it merely shifts between fixed identifications, moving within and beyond the boundaries of sexual orientation, nationality and politics and resisting the roles assigned by state and family, as Garay explains:

> When he asked me about being English, I tried to be precise—to tell the truth. I said that one side of me, the English side maybe, was a way of hiding from the other side, which was Argentinian, so that I never had to be a single fully formed person, I could always switch and improvise. (182)

The refutation of the notion of a unified identity is contained within the contradictions that emerge when attempting to define nationality precisely. The uncertainty of "maybe" undercuts the certainty of being "English" and "Argentinian", whilst the spontaneity found in "improvise" is still governed by the bounds implied in that sense of "hiding from the other side", which suggests a need to take refuge behind some kind of barrier, in this case one defined by race. Tóibín's narrator celebrates the freedom that diversity affords yet is always conscious of its limitations. This consciousness of the paradox of limited freedom is reinforced as the narrative endeavours to deconstruct confining stereotypes, maintaining an ironic distance between the narrator and his English mother:

> I was the little English boy holding my mother's hand on the way out of the Church of England service on Calle Rubicón on a Sunday morning, my mother smiling at members of the British colony, my mother wearing her good clothes and too much make-up and putting on her best accent and the weird, crooked smile she used on these occasions. (4)

The past tense distances the narrator from the bonds of family and nationality as he views the past with ironic detachment, yet the present participles, "holding", "smiling", "wearing", and the repetition of the possessive "my"

forge a connection between the past and present, between the individual and family. In challenging the restrictions of a fixed model of identity there is also proximity between the family and the individual that represents, simultaneously, an assertion of affiliation to the community along with an implied lack of contact. Ironically, within this context the "British colony" are the marginalized group with whom his mother makes a connection through the "putting on" of a guise that integrates her into that community. Whilst the narrator mocks the idea of a British colony desperately trying to assert its nationality, he also implies the need for communal allegiance, although this may be in a limited way.

The desire for rootedness is reinforced through the characterization of Garay's mother as geographical distance from home leads her to construct an image of England and Englishness that is then imposed upon him: "She loved my name, Richard, the Englishness of it, and she hated it when anybody used the Spanish version, Ricardo" (4). The interchangeability of Garay's name contributes to the notion of identity as being unstable. In this insistence on naming and maintaining the primacy of one language lies an enforced negation and suppression of possibilities for heterogeneity:

> As I grew older, she loved me sitting quietly in some corner of the apartment away from her reading a book. She liked the bookish part of me, she drooled over the English tweed suit which I had specially made by a tailor on Corrientes. She mistook my reserve and distance from her. She thought that it was real, and she never understood that it was fear. She liked my teaching at the university, even if it was only two hours a week in what passed for a language laboratory. And when I lost those hours and worked solely in Instituto San Martín, teaching repetitious English, she never mentioned it again, but saved it up to contemplate in her hours alone in her study, another bitter aspect of the way things had declined. (4)

Ironically, as the "Church of England" is found on "Calle Rubicón" so the "English tweed suit" is made by "a tailor on Corrientes". This reinforces the splitting and doubling of identity that the narrator registers and a diffusion of culture that his mother resists yet cannot escape.

Garay's mother interprets his character by employing a set of presuppositions that are influenced by racial stereotyping, which exacerbates the distance between them. Her limited perception is embodied in a fragmented collection of representations of England that demarcate the past, whilst her decline is marked by a comic preoccupation with imperialist discourse and an imagined home from which she is estranged:

> During her last year my mother grew obsessive about the emblems of empire: the Union Jack, the Tower of London, the Queen and Mrs

> Thatcher. As the light in her eyes began to fade, she plastered the apartment with tourist posters of Buckingham Palace and the changing of the guard and magazine photographs of the royal family.... (3)

She sees herself as an exile in the midst of the "half-bred savages" (53) of Argentina and becomes obsessed with an idea of England—"I do not think ... England mattered to her at all" (60).[10] The politics of family and state are embedded within this maternal figure. She can be perceived as articulating aspects of British imperialism and—ironically, in her obsession with emblematic representations of home—Irish nationalism, but offers opportunities for a plurality of interpretations. She evokes Margaret Thatcher, inciting fear, "ferocious" and "implacable" (71), and her resurrection of the past can be compared to Margaret Thatcher's patriotic rhetoric during the Falklands/Malvinas War.[11] In denouncing those who imagined that "Britain was no longer a nation that had built an empire and ruled a quarter of the world", Thatcher proposed "that the nation still has those sterling qualities which shine through our history" (Childs and Williams 1997, 206). This powerful discourse unified present and past yet, through its limited perception of present realities of the nation, alienated those Britons whose ancestors had experienced imperial rule. Similarly, Garay's mother is cast into a disabling darkness as her perception falters—"the light in her eyes began to fade" (3).

The crisis of estrangement from the authoritarian matriarchal or patriarchal figure is a motif that recurs frequently in Irish fiction, with the fractured family often acting as a microcosm of a nation fractured by the consequences of colonial rule.[12] Garay's Argentinian father is described as "fading" (16) whilst his mother fails to fulfil the traditional maternal role of nurturer, in effect mocking that ideal. She is a construct that contributes to a discourse that subverts the convention of the self-sacrificing Irish mother, and the traditional iconography of Mother Ireland as suffering mother, virgin and goddess, by presenting matriarchy as a destructive force. The power of "maternal manipulation" (Quinn 1991, 126–27)[13] is expressed uncompromisingly in Kavanagh's *The Great Hunger*:

> His mother's voice grew thinner like a rust-worn knife
> But it cut venomously as it thinned,
> It cut him up in the middle till he became more woman than man,
> And it cut through to his mind before the end. (1966, 15)

The diminishing matriarch does not lack power and, like Garay's mother, promotes "fear" even when in "bitter" (4) decline.

The potency of the matriarch in *The Story of the Night* is highlighted by an absence of 'I' in the novel's opening paragraph, although there is

implicit authority in the focalization process that constructs a reading of her character whilst remaining detached. Her death is exemplified by a focus on the personal pronoun 'I' and a juxtaposition of the 'end' with the present tense, "I am living once more" (3), signifying dissent from the ideology she represents. This begins a period of transition in which Garay gives up his post teaching the monotonous "repetitious English" (4) at the Instituto San Martín in Buenos Aires to embark upon a new career in the world of global politics employed by the enigmatic Americans Susan and Donald Ford. The assertion of individual authority, whilst suggesting rebirth and a sense of freedom from the influence of the family, is undercut by an element of restraint:

> I am living once more in her apartment. I am sleeping in her bed, and I am using, with particular relish, the heavy cotton sheets that she was saving for some special occasion. In all the years since she died I have never opened the curtains in this room. The window, which must be very dirty now, looks on to Lavalle, and if I open it I imagine there is a strong possibility that some residual part of my mother that flits around in the shadows of this room will fly out over the city, and I do not want that. I am not ready for it. (3)

The "plastered" apartment's oppressiveness has not diminished with time and the 'I' that confidently declares itself with "relish" is still subject to the influence of the past, and a darkened perception, as Garay states "I have never opened the curtains in this room". The narrator projects imaginings of the future in which the past will be lost, but the nature of this loss is vague, "some residual part", an elusive aura that "flits", remaining powerful and energetic when contrasted with the enveloping gloom of the interior and the memory of his mother's final weeks. The window, which promises possibilities for extending perception, becomes animated, "looks on", and contains potential for the future if the gaze is directed beyond its confining darkness. However, it is animate and inanimate, looking but not perceiving, providing an appropriate metaphor for the narrator's view of the world, which is clouded by a desire to remain rooted in the shadowy present. When teaching English to his lover's brother, Jorge Canetto, he "taught him how to ask questions in the present tense" (5). Garay tentatively retreats from the political domain and even when he sets up home with his lover in an apartment with huge windows he withdraws from the public gaze into a furtive world, resisting seeing as well as being seen.

Garay does not wish to relinquish the security of matriarchal authority, which is a source of comfort and discomfort, and be forced into an uncertain future—"I had no vision of a real future" (31). He makes sporadic attempts to define his mother's chthonic presence:

> Maybe that is what lingers in her bedroom, her disappointment and all the time she had alone to savour it and go over it in detail, some of that dull energy is left there, and I can feel it when I go into the room and I still call it Mother. (4)

The residue of authority conveys "disappointment" in an ideology that is tarnished whilst the paradoxical power of that "dull energy" undercuts the dynamic "flits". The spectre of the past haunts Irish literature, taking many such forms: the soul of Raphael Bell's father, who invades his dreams in Patrick McCabe's *The Dead School* (1995); the ghost of Francie Brady's mother in *The Butcher Boy* (1992); the shadow on the stairs in Seamus Deane's *Reading in the Dark* (1996); the patriarchal figure in Heaney's "Follower" (1966):

> It is my father who keeps stumbling
> Behind me, and will not go away. (1990, 6)

The humanist dimension of the work of Colm Tóibín, which is expressed primarily through his characters' sexual relationships, represents a movement beyond the centre of ideological control, beyond the boundaries of politics, religion and history. [14] Yet it is impossible to extricate the personal narrative from political discourse and whilst *The Story of the Night* focuses on an individual who is, seemingly, apolitical, Garay is nevertheless subject to the imposition of political controls. His assertion that "We took no notice of anything public; we lived in a small space" (53) suggests an abdication from political responsibility or awareness, but such narrow perception does not allow freedom from public constraints, as these forces are ever-present shadows enforcing limits and uncertainties with a menacing presence. Tóibín's representation of the political situation in Argentina during the 1980s effectively captures the retrospective confusion experienced when faced by unspeakable violence and terror:

> The generals were in power then, and nobody stayed out late, even though the cafés and bars in the streets around us remained open, eerily waiting for the lone customer who had missed his train to finish up and go, or for time to pass, or for something to happen. But nothing happened. Or, as we later learned, a great deal happened, but I never witnessed any of it. It was as though the famous disappearances we hear so much about now took place in a ghost city, a shadowy version of our own, and in the small hours when no sounds were made or traces left. I knew—or thought that I knew—no one in those years who disappeared, no one who was detained, no one who was threatened with detention. I knew no one at that time who told me that they knew anyone who was a victim.

> And there are others who have written about this and come to the conclusion that the disappearances did not occur, or occurred on a lesser scale than we have been led to believe. But that is not my conclusion. (6)

The collective consciousness suggested by "us" becomes a collective ignorance, which amounts to collusion and complicity in violence yet distance from it. There are contradictory statements and competing discourses regarding events, each discourse effectively undercutting the one before. A shift from "we" to the personal "I" and "my" distances the narrator from the communal response to violence. This distance is reinforced by the gap suggested between "then" and "now" as the "disappearances" exist on the margins of memory, on the margins of society. The city has clarity, yet the "disappearances" cloud vision and push the community further towards those margins it constructs. The narrator's interpretation of events is focused upon confusion or incomprehension that is derived from wilful blindness to the inconceivable:

> My conclusion centres on the strange lack of contact we have with each other here. It is not simply my problem, it is a crucial part of this faraway place to which our ancestors—my mother's father, my father's great-grandfather—came in search of vast tracts of land: we have never trusted each other here, or mixed with each other. There is no society here, just a terrible loneliness which bears down on us all, and bears down on me now. Maybe it is possible that I could watch someone being dragged away in front of my eyes and not recognize it. I would somehow miss the point, and maybe that is what I did, and others like me did, during those years. We saw nothing, not because there was nothing, but because we had trained ourselves not to see. (6)

Isolation replaces the fragmentation of a community that tolerates the abuse of power. Whilst Garay appears to negate any concept of a communal identity, "we" registers its presence, although dysfunctional. The imaginative construction of a "faraway place" reinforces feelings of disconnection and dislocation. Again, an emphasis on the personal "my" appears to highlight a conflict between personal responsibility and public affiliation to a political system of control. Argentina seems analogous to Ireland with its sense of displacement when faced with the violence of its colonial/post-colonial past and the resurgence of violent conflict in the North. Tóibín's response to the Northern crisis in Fintan O'Toole's television documentary *Dancing at the Crossroads* (1995) registers a similar confusion when he suggests that "violence exposed the hollowness of the dream" and "meaning was lost". *The Story of the Night* suggests that abjuration from political culpability can be

dangerous; inhabiting a "small space" does not prevent the intrusive presence of the public domain and the ever-present shadow of the state:

> In those years you moved carefully; without knowing why, you watched out. It was something in the atmosphere, something unsaid and all-pervasive, rather than anything printed in the papers or broadcast over the radio. You did not want to be the lone figure in the street at night. (7)

"The story of the night" (118),[15] with its personal, enclosing absolute, signifies a plethora of stories of political darkness, and as the narrator's perception extends beyond the enclave of the family he makes connections to other "refugees" (37). The Chilean, Raúl, who is subjected to torture, inhabits the "shadows" of political violence and, in contrast to Garay, his perception possesses clarity: "He saw everything. He saw all the murders and mutilations" (49), whereas from within the blindness of political apathy, Garay states, "We saw nothing" (7). Similarly, the experience of the Americans, Donald and Susan Ford, during the fall of Allende's government in Chile, provides a counter-discourse to Raúl's that registers an interior gaze. As Susan tries to explain: "We were locked in our own world. We saw no newspapers or television" (157). This failure of perception is linked to a failure of communication and linguistic breakdown: "All the signs were there, and I attended the meetings, but I didn't understand the language that they used then" (157). Like the Fords in Chile, Garay retreats from understanding or communicating but maintains a silence: "I did not tell the story of the night" (118). Tóibín's novel intimates that suppression of the political narrative does not free the individual from the impact of political forces. On the contrary, averting the gaze is a political act. In a report on the trials of General Galtieri in Argentina in 1985, Tóibín warns against a limited perception of political violence:

> It is easy to dismiss what happened in Argentina between 1976 and 1980 as another example of South American irrationality and cruelty... as part of the appalling metaphysics of South America ... What happened in Argentina, however, was not metaphysical, what happened in Argentina was political. (1990b, 20)

Garay resides within a "twilight time" (6) in which anonymous, sexual encounters in the bath-houses of Buenos Aires comprise a "hidden universe of unwritten rules" (144) that he understands: "I learned to read the signs" and "the signs were generally clear" (64). This world, in which there is an absence of linguistic control, merely constructs another form of confinement as, within the stability of his relationship with his lover, Pablo, is instability with the threat of AIDS. When Pablo tries to describe the

physical effects of AIDS on his eyes—"There's a dark shadow in one entire corner" (302)—he suggests that there is no escape from a "shadow world" (259) of not perceiving, an idea that Garay reinforces:

> I believed as I travelled due north that I was moving from a shadow world into a world of substance. I expected everything to be ordered and opulent, shiny and glamorous. And instead it was chaotic and run-down and also amazing in its wealth and sense of energy and expectancy. (259)

The sense of expectation that Garay registers in moving beyond the borders of the community of the nation is never realised as he discovers chaos and suggests that faith in a "world of substance" may not be sufficient to create that world. He tentatively embraces the values of commercialism, as embodied by American culture, as a source of "energy" to counter apathy and an exclusive, and limiting, perception of the nation.[16] Simply embracing the energetic force of global commercialism, however, seems insufficient to enable Irish writers to create a view of the world that responds to continuing conflict within the North and political uncertainty, both of which contribute to overwhelming disunity within Ireland. Whilst *The Story of the Night* moves beyond the limiting perspective of a Gaelic, Catholic, republican, patriarchal nation, it is still conditioned by its influences. The sexual status of Garay in *The Story of the Night* disrupts conventional polarities, yet same-sex desire is presented as being prone to disease and death, originating from a liberal America.

As the authoritarian discourse of family and state is challenged, subverted and abandoned within the novels of Tóibín, a linguistic transformation marks this abandonment. However, unintelligible voices from the past remain intrusive, and succeed in disabling the present generation. The deterioration of Garay's mother, following a seizure, is signified when she begins "making unintelligible sounds" (57), but, after her death, he "can hear her screeching now" (4). In *The Heather Blazing*, Eamon Redmond's father suffers a stroke, speaking in a "slow limp and impaired voice" (148) that is "distorted" (142). His narratives are inaccessible, becoming no more than "vague sounds" that "make no sense" (149). This can be read as a paralysis of the past in which the narratives of history become increasingly incomprehensible. Past and present converge when Redmond's wife also suffers a stroke, embodying the emotional silence pervading their relationship. This emotional, and political, estrangement is also suggested in *The Blackwater Lightship* (Tóibín 1999) through the relationship between Helen and Hugh. Hugh, a teacher in an all-Irish school, converses with family and friends in Irish but Helen "made out very little of what he said" (11). Similarly, in *The South* Richard Proctor, Katherine's son, explains the disunity within the family in terms of linguistic breakdown—"night after

night of silence, of isolation" (204). The inadequacies of language in trying to articulate frustration with the rhetoric of the state leave the individual with no recourse but to adopt the language of gesture as a way of connecting with the community. Richard Garay moves between worlds, finding solace in the silent communication of the bath-houses, which involves "reading the signs" (64). It is a state of aphasia that highlights the limitations of language, and rejects it as the source of ideological power.

In attempting to move beyond the limitations of the past Tóibín's novels suggest a need to re-read the past in present terms in order to counteract linguistic paralysis and a sense of utter desolation. But those present terms cannot be freed from history. Terry Eagleton suggests that "history in a sense determines the forms in which we can free ourselves from it, however much we resent them" (1999, 46). In an interview with Lynne Tillman following the publication of his first novel, *The South*, Tóibín expresses a desire to escape history: "What all of us want, more than anything, is to be able to escape from history, to be able to say that we choose our own destiny, that there's nobody coming after us from the past" (1992, 23). Liberation from the past, however, does not provide the autonomy that Tóibín appears to seek, as *The Story of the Night* illustrates. The past can provide a sense of security and be a source of power; it is interpretation that becomes important. Richard Kearney advocates keeping "the horizon of history" (1991, 70) open by a simultaneous distancing and appropriation of history as: "Without the backward look of myth, a culture is deprived of its memory. Without the forward look, it is deprived of its dreams" (1991, 64). However, as *The Story of the Night* suggests, myth can be problematic if symbols are read literally and may act as "an ideological agency of distortion and dissimulation" (Kearney 1991, 65), leading to entrapment in a static, unchanging and unchangeable perspective. As Frank Kermode explains:

> Myths operate within the diagrams of ritual, which presupposes total and adequate explanations of things as they are and were; it is a sequence of radically unchangeable gestures. Fictions are for finding things out, and they change as the needs of sense-making change. Myths are the agents of stability; fictions the agents of change. Myths call for absolute, fictions for conditional assent. Myths make sense in terms of a lost order of time, illud tempus, as Eliade calls it; fictions, if successful, make sense of the here and now, hoc tempus. (1967, 39)

The novels of Tóibín, particularly *The Story of the Night*, propose a way beyond insular representations of Irishness, yet the new, empowered representations of Ireland do not offer any positive sense of communal belonging to counter a prevalent sense of disunity within Irish literature. On

the contrary, the linguistic enclosures within Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1956), and Patrick Kavanagh's *The Great Hunger*, with its mimetic echo, resonate throughout his fiction:

> Is there no escape?
> No escape, no escape. (1966, 21)

NOTES

[1] It could be argued that society is in a permanent state of crisis, of instability. Frank Kermode offers the proposal that this transitional state derives from the sense of being constantly at a "position in the middest" (1967, 96).

[2] De Valera's insular vision of an independent Ireland was destined for failure within a global economy and contributed to the economic necessity of mass emigration. Control by the state, through legislation such as censorship, had a regressive and stifling effect on the cultural life of the country. Fintan O'Toole suggests that de Valera's Ireland was a "cultural desert" (1997, 99). It could be argued, however, that despite the inhibiting force of censorship it did not succeed in completely suppressing creativity but forced it abroad by imposing a state of exile on many Irish writers. During the 1960s various factors, including free secondary education and a revival within the Irish publishing industry, began a process of cultural growth. Terence Brown identifies a period of "revolution", beginning in the 1960s, in which "A society that had sought its rationale in a separatism justified by national distinctiveness had decided to open itself to the forces of the international marketplace, to seek economic growth as the primary national goal, and to enter fully into the economic and political life of the industrially developed states of Western Europe" (1985, 267).

[3] Fintan O'Toole suggests that the recent period of change has culminated in some stability and locates 1996 as being a pivotal year for Ireland, when Irish independence "takes on a permanent look" (1997, 3). He cites factors marking this change as the 75th anniversary of the Anglo-Irish Treaty, the Dublin summit of the European Union and an economic boom resulting in economic stability and Ireland being economically stronger than the UK. The final passage of divorce legislation within Ireland symbolised a loss of Church authority in matters of the State, whilst the withdrawal of Britain from Hong Kong represented, symbolically, the end of the British Empire. O'Toole suggests that this was a point when Ireland ceased to define itself in terms of Britain (1997, 3). However, it could be argued that, despite claims to the contrary, O'Toole still seems to be defining Ireland's economic progress in terms of Britain's economic stability. The basis of the relationship between Britain and Ireland may have altered but it is still a significant one. In a recent lecture Richard Kearney (1998) proposed that the

1998 Good Friday Agreement "binds Britain and Ireland inextricably" through the North/South governing bodies and the British/Irish Consul.

[4] Paul Ricoeur adopts a spatial metaphor to define utopian thought, which, he proposes, provides a counter-balance to ideology. He suggests that "ideology has one fundamental function: to pattern, to consolidate, to provide order to the course of action" (1991, 318). Utopian thought has a "subversive function" (322). Ricoeur suggests that from the "no place" of utopia "an exterior glance is cast on our reality, which suddenly looks strange" thus "The field of the possible is now opened beyond that of the actual, a field of alternative ways of living" (320). Ricoeur further states that the "tension" between ideology and utopia is "insurpassable" and "the interplay of ideology and utopia appears as an interplay of two fundamental directions of the social imagination. The first tends towards integration, repetition and a mirroring of a given order. The second tends to disintegration because it is eccentric". Furthermore, ideology introduces a "gap" (323), which suggests the possibility of an alternative to the preserved pattern.

[5] This perceived sense of freedom could originate from a revisionist narrative that is concerned with liberating the present generation from the legacy of history by establishing a distance from the conflicts of the past. Colm Tóibín's novel *The Heather Blazing* (1992) explores the blood sacrifice of 1798, presenting a legacy of disempowerment that is passed from father to son in which the past is an enigma that stifles and haunts the present.

[6] Roy Foster's assessment of the Irish Free State encompasses the unity and disunity in Ireland: "De Valera's Ireland became a twenty-six county state with thirty-two county pretensions, institutionalizing a powerful Catholic ethos that was symbolically celebrated in the Eucharistic Congress of 1932 and effectively enshrined in the Constitution of 1937" (1989, 537). Membership of the EEC and political change in Ireland during the 60s, 70s and 80s failed to seriously undermine the dominant Catholic ethos and projection of the Irish population as heterosexual, Roman Catholic male. For example, in 1980 David Norris's challenge in the High Court to the laws banning homosexuality was unsuccessful on the basis that the evidence in his case was an infringement of the Christian nature of the Irish State (Grant 1992, 10).

[7] Terence Brown examines the position of Anglo-Irish Protestants in Ireland and concludes that "The establishment of the Irish Free State found Protestant Ireland in the twenty-six counties ideologically, politically and emotionally unprepared for the uncharted waters of the new separatist seas, where they comprised what was seen by many of their nationalist fellow citizens as an ethnic minority" (1985, 106).

[8] The name Garay invites multiple interpretations. It contains 'gay' and 'gray', a colour evoking indefinable shadows, yet also invokes the dual character of Gar in Brian Friel's *Philadelphia, Here I Come* (1964). Friel's characterizations and stage directions make a distinction between the

"public" and "private" personas, the seen and "unseen", the corporeal and "the spirit" of the character (Friel 1984, 27). I am grateful to Dr Michael Parker for pointing out the connection to Friel's play.

[9] Laura Donaldson points out the limitations in trying to define identity in terms of fixed polarities. In formulating an ideology of gender she proposes the need to maintain "the fluidity and complexity of what we call 'identity'" (1993, 34).

[10] The characterization of Garay's mother embodies aspects of the British national psyche as identified by Linda Colley, who suggests that the development of a British identity relied upon "recurrent Protestant wars, commercial success and imperial conquest" (1992, 375). Thus, "contact with, and dominion over manifestly alien peoples nourished Britons' sense of superior difference" (1992, 369).

[11] Thatcher's response to Ireland, North and South, during the 1980s was singularly dismissive. Terence Brown describes her "intractable stand" during the Hunger Strikes in Northern Ireland as "an error of incalculable proportions" (1985, 343). Similarly, Thatcher's response to the New Ireland Forum Report in 1984, which proposed three frameworks for the future of Ireland, was uncompromising in its emphatic rejection, characterized by the words "Out, out, out" (Brown 1985, 343).

[12] The consequences of colonial rule within Ireland include a history of resistance and bloodshed, partition, economic hardship and mass emigration.

[13] Quinn's essay provides compelling insight into Kavanagh's poem and suggests that Maguire is "emasculated by matriarchy" (127). It could be argued, however, that the matriarchal sub-structure, as presented in the poem, is controlled by a patriarchal ideology that sought to suppress sexuality as a means of economic and political control.

[14] The 'humanist dimension' privileges the restorative potential of intimate human relationships. At a reading of *The Story of the Night* in September 1996, Tóibín expressed a desire that his readers should "connect" with his characters, suggesting a need for mutual understanding on a human level. In an interview with me in June 1998, he emphasised the humanist aspects of *The Story of the Night* and suggested that the novel's form draws upon the structural patterns of the 18th-century confessional novel. There is always an awareness in Tóibín's writings, however, that the scope of humanist values is limited. For example, Richard Garay's familial status allows the possibility of being candid about his relationship with Pablo Canetto whilst the culture of masculinity found within the Canetto family, and Argentina, inhibits such candour.

[15] Garay recollects that he does not tell them the story of the night when he saw cars parked, without drivers, engines running. He later learns that the power was employed to drive the cattle prods used by the police to torture prisoners. Garay's story is one of political darkness, a fragmented narrative requiring emplotment. This aspect of the novel compares to Seamus Deane's

Reading in the Dark (1996), which also explores narrativity. The narrator in Deane's novel is concerned with the emplotment of the fragmented stories of the past, acting as a mediator of family history who, ironically, believes he can read, interpret and produce a configuration of "All of it" (214).

[16] Fintan O'Toole suggests that the "cultural currency of Anglo-America, of which Ireland is now a part, has proved a useful literary resource" although it is debatable whether concerns with "religion, nationalism and land" have been relinquished as he proposes (1988, 35).

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