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Memory and Manipulation in Irish Literature: A Study of Selected Works by Colm Tóibín and Anne Enright

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MEMORY AND MANIPULATION IN IRISH LITERATURE: A STUDY OF SELECTED WORKS BY COLM TÓIBÍN AND ANNE ENRIGHT

Abstract

The aim of the article is to analyse a selection of literary works by Colm Tóibín and Anne Enright from the perspective of modernist and postmodernist theories about memory and identity. It is argued that Tóibín's and Enright's works are characterised by a typically postmodern approach towards memory: their narrators are both acutely aware of the significance of memory in the creation of their identity, and of its limitations. This paradoxical approach towards the question of memory, which stresses its importance as well as its fallibility, is of central importance in this article.

Key words

literature, memory, identity, Tóibín, Enright

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Introduction: Memory and Identity

Memory is a topic which permeates modern literature. Although it is best researched in detailed case studies of contemporary authors, some general reasons may be suggested for its strong presence in literature. One reason may be the rise in popularity of life writing – it seems only natural that as writers set out to describe their past, they tend to reflect on the mechanisms of recalling it. The only problem with this observation is that it is by no means confined to contemporary literature: the topic of memory in the context of autobiography reaches at least as far back as St. Augustine's *Confessions*. Another pos-

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sible reason is given by Nicola King in her interesting study of memory in modern literature. As King observes, the resurgence of memory in contemporary prose can be attributed to the influence of postmodernism as a philosophical and aesthetic movement. Viewed from this perspective, the presence of memory is a sign of the “desire to secure a sense of self in the wake of postmodern theories of the de-centred human subject” (King 2000: 11). It can be argued that in the sceptical age of postmodernism, writers have turned to memory as a possible anchor for human identity.

While the explanation given by Nicola King for the popularity of memory in postmodern fiction seems reasonable, it should be noted that the role of memory in the creation of one’s identity was also appreciated by modernist writers. A good example of this can be found in an important essay on memory by one of the great modernists – Virginia Woolf. In her memoir “A Sketch of the Past,” Woolf sets out to formulate a working theory of memory and its role in the process of writing. After recalling some of the earliest and most formative experiences of her life, which “can still be more real than the present moment” (1996: 318), Woolf adds: “I can reach a state where I seem to be watching things happen as if I were there” (1996: 318). Indeed, the readers of her memoirs can witness Woolf’s ability to evoke graphic and suggestive images from the past. As one critic has observed, for Woolf “the past is always present” (Nalbantian 2003: 78); in other words, the memories are always ready and ‘at hand’ – to be accessed and turned into a literary work. Such memories are evoked to pay witness to the past – people and places long gone – but this is certainly not the only purpose. Woolf’s narratives of the past have what may be called a therapeutic value: they are a way of confronting the feeling of shock in her life. Woolf is convinced that by explaining to herself what experiences underlie the shock, she can successfully deal with it: “It is only by putting it into words that I make it whole; this wholeness means that it has lost its power to hurt me” (1996: 323).

This short reference to Woolf’s memoirs is relevant in the context of the present discussion as it conveys an attitude towards memory which many narrators of contemporary works – including the prose of Colm Tóibín and Anne Enright – take with respect to their past: similarly to Woolf, they view it as strongly present in their life, and secondly they have the tendency to examine their own painful past, often with the hope of reaching some form of understanding.

In many literary works, including the ones to be discussed in this article, memory is the key factor in creating one’s identity. This does not by any means suggest that recalling one’s past, both recent and re-

mote, is viewed as a reliable and trustworthy way of creating our sense of self. On the contrary, contemporary writers recognise the fallibility of memory along with its importance for one's identity. It is this paradoxical combination – the significance as well as the limitations of memory – which will be the main subject of this article.

Reflective narrators in Tóibín's prose: *The Master*

One feature which Tóibín's works share is their preoccupation with the past. Both his novels and his short stories have narrators or characters who are "forced to confront difficult memories" (Delaney 2008: 9). Perhaps the best known of Tóibín's novels to feature such a character is *The Master* (2004). *The Master* is a fictionalized account of Henry James's life from 1895 to 1899. The narrative, focalized by James, shows the writer as a solitary and reflective person, with a strong tendency to ponder upon his past, especially his attachments to the people he once loved. *The Master* is where the most haunting scene in all of Tóibín's prose can be found: on learning about the tragic death of his close friend, Constance Woolson, the grief-stricken James decides to visit Venice, where his friend spent the last years of her life. Having cleared Woolson's apartment, the writer is left with the dilemma of what to do with Woolson's clothes. After much reflection, he decides not to donate them to charity, but to throw them in a canal. To his horror, the clothes refuse to sink and soon resurface despite his repeated efforts. The scene has been analysed in most studies of Tóibín's *oeuvre*. Stephen Matterson interprets it from the perspective of the writer's consciousness in which "the dead continually rise, whether unbidden or desired, to the surface" (2008: 144). Indeed, the main metaphor here is that of return – people and scenes from the past repeatedly come back in James's thoughts, often becoming the subject of his works.

The necessity of confronting the burden of the past is present in all the works of Tóibín. This article concentrates on two novels which have not yet been given so much critical attention: *The Blackwater Lightship* (1999) and *The Testament of Mary* (2012).

Space and the Workings of Memory: Colm Tóibín's *The Blackwater Lightship*

It is a common feature of literary works which describe the workings of memory that they concentrate on space. The most revealing

comments on the nature of memory in the context of space can be found in Gaston Bachelard's phenomenological study *The Poetics of Space*. In it, Bachelard refers to Bergson's philosophy of time, arguing that memory as such does not record duration. Rather, "[m]emories are motionless, and the more securely they are fixed in space, the sounder they are" (1996: 9). Bachelard illustrates this thesis by exploring the kinds of space – the basement, the attic, the cottage – which often recur in human memory. One of his arguments is that people reimagine space, because they seek emotional palliation. This is particularly relevant in the context of mental representations of the hut. In an interesting fragment Bachelard interprets dreams about huts as an expression of a yearning to "flee in thought in search of a real refuge" (1996: 31).

Bachelard's comment about the search for a refuge is especially resonant in the context of Tóibín's prose. Many of his works are about the figure of a returned exile – a theme which Tóibín in his introduction to *The Penguin Book of Irish Fiction* identifies as a recurrent one in Irish literature. This theme can be found in his fourth novel, *The Blackwater Lightship* (1999). The novel concentrates on the homecoming of a young man, Declan, who is dying of AIDS. Declan wishes to spend the last months of his life in the small house of his grandmother, Dora, at the Irish seaside, where he, together with his sister, Helen, spent a great part of their childhood. His reason for coming back to Dora's house is to retreat to the comforting space of the small house, which he, similarly to Helen, associates with comfort and security.

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The stay at Dora's hut is both for Declan and Helen a return to their childhood. This is best illustrated by Helen's reflection on her first visit – since the days of her childhood – to Dora's house:

She passed a mud ruin where old Julia Dempsey had lived out her days, and she would have given anything then to go back to the years before their father died, when they were children here and did not know what was in store for them (Tóibín 2000: 46).

There are two important observations to be made in the context of the fragment quoted: first of all, Helen, similarly to Declan, associates childhood with a time of security and ignorance. It is also worthwhile to consider the mechanisms of memory at work here. In *The Blackwater Lightship* memories of things past come to the protagonists in sudden images. These moments of brief but lucid insight into the past are largely involuntary, as the protagonists are confronted with objects familiar from their childhood – such as the mud ruin that Helen sees in the fragment quoted – which, in turn, trigger memories of people and events connected with them.

The image of the house as shelter is an image that is by no means seminal; what remains new and worth closer analysis is the way that this imagery changes in Tóibín's novel.

If the house is indeed a refuge, it is a refuge which is in danger of imminent collapse. The sea, which the protagonists admire, is a serious threat to Dora's house due to the gradual erosion of the cliffs. The constant battling of the waves and the ensuing erosion of the land carry a symbolical significance in the novel, as has been observed by many of Tóibín's critics. According to Oona Frawley, the theme of erosion "presents us with physical fissures in memory and history, and undermines certainties about the past, rootedness and identity" (2008: 74). Indeed, the workings of the sea can be interpreted as symbolizing the flow of time and the gradual withering away of memories, which are some of the most important factors shaping human identity.

The image of the house as a refuge is questioned not only by the symbolism of the sea, but also by the experiences of the protagonists. As mentioned, the prospect of homecoming is at first comforting for Declan, but then, as his daydreams come into conflict with reality, it becomes increasingly troubling. Observing her brother closely during his stay at Dora's house, Helen reflects that Declan "was trapped here now" (Tóibín 2000: 121), and forced to confront his unresolved conflicts with his family and his friends. Perhaps the most serious issue which is rooted in the past is the trauma shared by Declan and Helen: when they were children, their mother, Lily, left them to the care of their grandmother, as she assisted her husband, Declan and Lily's father, who was dying of cancer¹. The house then from a comforting shelter becomes a space in which Declan is imprisoned with the ghosts of his past. A similar observation can be made with respect to Helen – she too gradually becomes aware of her past. In an important fragment she reflects that "I had put away parts of myself that were damaged and left them rotting" (Tóibín 2000: 187). The powerful imagery of this metaphor shows Helen's conviction that the past – in this case the suppressed memories of abandonment and insecurity – have a direct influence on her life; they are, according to the metaphor, an integral part of her.

¹ The theme of maternal abandonment is recurrent in Tóibín's prose: it features in such novels as *The Blackwater Lightship*, *The Testament of Mary*, and *Nora Webster*, as well as in such short stories as "A Song," "A Long Winter," and "The Colour of Shadows."

Bearing witness: Colm Tóibín's *The Testament of Mary*

One general feature shared by the literary works of Colm Tóibín and Anne Enright is a philosophical stance which Jean-François Lyotard famously called “incredulity towards metanarratives” (1984: xxiv)². This sceptical attitude manifests itself most clearly with respect to the narrative of history. Tóibín’s and Enright’s narrators have a tendency to read the history of their country and of their community against the grain of the prevailing views and attitudes. They are often characterised by a determination to interrogate their past however painful and shaming it may be. This sceptical and revisionist stance towards history is especially visible in Tóibín’s novella *The Testament of Mary* (2012).

The Testament of Mary is narrated by Mary, the mother of Christ, who, living out her last years in Ephesus, tells her own version of her Son’s life. Mary is accompanied by two of Jesus’s disciples, whose main aim is to write an account of Jesus’s life, focusing on His teachings and His miracles. The novella, then, presents not one, but two narratives about Jesus’s life: the canonical one to be found in the Gospels, and Mary’s story, which is much more cautious and sceptical.

Tóibín’s novella has been described as a gospel according to Mary, but in a way this title is misleading. This is because Mary’s narrative positions itself in opposition to the canonical accounts of Jesus’s life, and to the ideology underlying them. First of all, the aim of Mary’s narrative is by no means to convey a good message (good spell – Gospel) about Jesus’s life; on the contrary, it is a sombre story told by a pensive woman, who, characteristically of Tóibín’s narrators, struggles with the burden of the past. Indeed, *The Testament of Mary* is best characterised as Mary’s confession, as its main focus is on her doubts, apprehensions and, most importantly, her acute feeling of guilt. The main source of Mary’s suffering is the awareness that she and Jesus’s disciples abandoned Him, as He was dying on the cross, in fear of persecution. Unlike the disciples, who are all too ready to suppress the memories of Jesus’s painful death and their shameful escape, Mary is compelled to describe them in her narrative.

² This point has been taken up by Oona Frawley, who, in an interesting article about cultural memory in the context of Tóibín’s prose, observes that his work “offers a determined critique of grand narratives of history that present a consolidated and simplified view of the past” (2008: 71).

From its first pages Mary's narrative is driven by the imperative to tell the truth about Jesus's life. She strongly opposes the two disciples – unnamed in the novella – and their tendency to distort past events so that they conform to their own vision of Jesus's life. Mary clearly distances herself from their desire “to make connections, weave a pattern, a meaning into things” (Tóibín 2013: 87). Her own private project is rather to forestall possible manipulations by writing down what she considers to be the truth:

I speak simply because I can, because enough has happened and because the chance might not come again. It will not be long maybe when I begin again to dream that I waited on the hill that day and held him naked in my arms, it will not be long before that dream, so close to me now and so real, will fill the air and will make its way backwards into time and thus become what happened [...] (Tóibín 2013: 87).

Mary is not only a confessional but also a self-conscious narrator: contrary to the two disciples, she is aware of her inherent and all too human tendency to distort the past in accordance with her wishes. Interestingly, Mary is also conscious of the fact that her resistance to this tendency is doomed to fail – with the passage of time, she will perhaps ‘give in’ to the more wishful account of events – which is why the task of writing her confession becomes for her such a pressing issue. Tóibín's Mary shares what may be called a paradoxical and typically postmodern approach towards the issue of memory: affirming its power in the creation of one's identity, and at the same time questioning its veracity. As the next subchapter will show, this acute self-consciousness is also one of the most important features of Veronica Hegarty, the narrator of *The Gathering* by Anne Enright. On the one hand, Veronica bases her entire narrative on her memories; on the other, throughout her entire narrative she undermines their accuracy.

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Doubting narrator: Anne Enright's *The Gathering*

One feature which Enright's narrators share – especially in her later novels – is what may be called a strongly revisionist attitude towards their past. The narrators of *The Gathering* (2007) and *The Forgotten Waltz* (2011) are convinced that it is only by confronting their past – at times difficult and painful – that they can come to terms with their life. This is by no means confined to Enright's first-person narratives: such novels as *What are You Like* (2000) and *The Green Road* (2015) have protagonists who at some stage of their life become aware

that it is only by confronting their past that they can achieve peace and a sense of fulfilment. While the topic of the past and recalling the past permeates all of Enright's works, it is most strongly present in her first-person narratives, and especially her Booker Prize-winning *The Gathering*, which will be of central interest in this subchapter.

In an interview conducted by Claire Bracken and Susan Cahill, Enright makes a revealing comment on her most famous novel. As she observes, "*The Gathering* is interested in the edges between, certainly fantasy or imagination and memory, between memory and history and where we let go of memory, where it ossified and turns into history [...]" (Bracken and Cahill 2011: 30). This comment points to an important topic which is recurrent in her novel – the manipulation of one's past, both deliberate and unconscious. That the past can be distorted in the act of recalling it is a truth which the narrator of this novel, Veronica Hegarty, always keeps in mind, and of which she constantly reminds her readers. In the first sentence of the novel she writes: "I would like to write down what happened in my grandmother's house the summer I was eight or nine, but I am not sure if it really did happen. I need to bear witness to an uncertain event" (Enright 2008a: 1). At the end of the first chapter she emphasizes her ignorance of the past by admitting that "I do not know the truth, or I do not know how to tell the truth. All I have are stories [...]" (Enright 2008a: 2). The first sentence of *The Gathering* highlights two features of Veronica's narrative, which have been mentioned in the introduction to this chapter as an essentially postmodernist combination: the need to recall the past and simultaneously doubting the felicity of this undertaking.

In *The Gathering* the truth about the past is at once obscure and painful. It concerns the life of Veronica's late brother, Liam, who in his childhood was sexually abused by one Lambert Nugent, a friend of the Hegarty family. Veronica was witness to this event, which, as she observes in the first story of the novel, happened in her grandmother's house, when she was eight or nine, and Liam was a year younger. Although the memory of this event is hazy, it becomes a traumatic experience for her. Driven by a motivation not unlike that mentioned by Virginia Woolf, Veronica decides to describe it in her narrative. One of the main aims of her narrative is to make clear the sequence of events leading up to Liam's death.

Veronica's insistence on this past event should not only be attributed to her trauma. Similarly to Mary in Tóibín's novella, she wants to "bear witness" to what happened in the distant past. As she makes clear later on, she is the only person, apart from her brother, who knew about the sexual abuse. It is this awareness which is one of the

main factors that compels her to write the story. Throughout her narrative she wonders if she should reveal this episode to members of her family – most importantly, to her mother – but ultimately decides against it, sensing that the pain caused by revealing this information would only aggravate the suffering of her relatives.

Despite the fact that the episode of Liam's sexual abuse is described as late as in chapter twenty-two (out of thirty-nine chapters), it is central to Veronica's narrative from its very beginning. The importance of this episode is conveyed in the following sentence taken from the opening of chapter three: "The seeds of my brother's death were sown many years ago. The person who planted them is long dead – at least that's what I think" (Enright 2008a: 13). Veronica's aim, as she sees it, is to look back upon the past with a view to explaining his troubled life – his problems with alcohol, his emotional instability and his depression, leading to his suicidal death in his late thirties. In order to do so, she decides to write at length about the person whom she considers responsible for her brother's plight – the man who planted "the seeds of death" – that is, Lambert Nugent, Ada's rejected lover and her family's one-time landlord. The question which Veronica does not answer overtly is when exactly were "the seeds of [Liam's] death" sown – was it during his childhood, or perhaps much earlier – when Nugent became a friend of her family's.

It is worthwhile to notice that the metaphorical expression "the seeds of death" presents death not as a sudden and tragic event, but as the end-stage of a longer process. This notion is in keeping with Veronica's general notion of history, which she presents in the following fragment:

History is only biological – that's what I think. We pick and choose the facts about ourselves – where we came from and what it means. [...] What is written for the future is written in the body, the rest is only spoor" (Enright 2008a: 162–3).

Veronica opposes the traditional notion of history – that which is based on a narrative constructed on the basis of one's knowledge and other people's testimonies – with an alternative notion of history – that which is written on the body and has a tangible influence on a person's life.

What may be called a "biological" notion of history can also be found in one of Enright's most interesting short stories, "Here's to Love." "Here's to Love" tells the story of a relationship between a thirty-nine-year-old Irish woman – the narrator of the story – and her much older husband, a Vietnamese war veteran. The woman's narrative concentrates on her great love for her husband and on her attempts to

understand the painful history which he experienced in his life – the invasions of the Japanese, the French and the American armies and his long internment in a war camp. At the same time, her story shows her inability to fully fathom his traumatic past – in one fragment she refers to her husband as “a man who can not pass an Alsatian dog without wetting himself, a man whose left foot and ankle were broken in fifteen different places” (Enright 2008b: 170). The fragment powerfully conveys the woman’s sense of estrangement from her husband, which is based on the awareness that the history of his life – although well-known to her – will remain an obstacle in reaching the understanding and intimacy she desires. “Here’s to Love” shows what is also apparent in *The Gathering*: a sense that although history as a narrative can appear well-ordered and accessible, it can manifest itself in ways which are beyond the comprehension of those who did not take part in it.

Veronica is in a sense a model postmodernist narrator as her increasing reliance on memory in the construction of her narrative is countered by a strong impulse to question the veracity of those memories. The tendency to concentrate on the “edges between [...] fantasy or imagination and memory” (Bracken and Cahill 2011), though clear throughout the novel, is perhaps most evident in chapter three. After describing – in great detail and with narrative flair – the first meeting between Ada and Nugent, during which Nugent fell hopelessly in love with Ada – she then questions its veracity with the disconcerting statement: “This is all my romance, of course” (Enright 2008a: 21). Veronica’s self-reflexive comment, which dramatizes the boundary between memory and fantasy, are not confined to the Ada-Nugent episode, but also refers to the central event in her narrative: that of Liam’s sexual abuse in chapter twenty-two. Here, Veronica does not question the existence of the event – as she writes, “I know it is *true* that this happened” (Enright 2008a: 144) – but the way she remembers it. As with most of her memories, the recollection of the traumatic event is based on an image, which Veronica describes in detail – as if it was indeed frozen in time – and then reflects on its accuracy: “I think it may be a false memory, because there is a terrible tangle of things that I have to fight through to get to it, in my head. And also because it is unbearable” (Enright 2008a: 144). A criterion which Veronica uses to judge the accuracy of her memory is what may be called its accessibility – whether or not it is effortless for her to conjure up the event in the form of an image. Paradoxically, Veronica’s self-conscious comments which aim at undermining the accuracy of the memory are likely to achieve the opposite effect: from the psychoanalytic perspective, the

fact that the memory is obscure and perhaps partly suppressed by her only lends credence to it.

Conclusion

Analysing the novels of Virginia Woolf and William Faulkner from the perspective of memory, Suzanne Nalbantian observes that “for most of the characters past and present are commingled in a continuum of give and take as they search for their identities” (2003: 99). Nalbantian’s observation can also be applied to the characters and narrators of Tóibín’s and Enright’s works. This sense of past and present as continuum is clearly visible especially in their first-person narratives: as the narrators are reminded of past events and experiences, they incorporate them into their stories, thus creating the impression of an almost seamless connection between the moment of writing and days long gone. This impression is not confined to the narrators: in the best novels – such as Tóibín’s *The Master* and Enright’s *The Gathering* – the reader is witness to the intimate workings of the human mind, which can make the past a present and pervasive element of reality. By showing the significance of memory for the creation of one’s identity, as well as its limitations and possible manipulations, contemporary literature has an influence on how we recreate the past, both personal and collective.

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Streszczenie

Celem artykułu jest analiza wybranych dzieł literackich Colma Tóibína oraz Anne Enright z perspektywy modernistycznych i postmodernistycznych teorii pamięci i tożsamości. Dzieła Colma Tóibína oraz Anne Enright charakteryzują się typowo postmodernistycznym podejściem do pamięci: ich narratorzy są boleśnie świadomi wagi pamięci w tworzeniu świadomości, jak i jej ograniczeń. Ten paradoks, łączący głębokie znaczenie pamięci wraz z jej zawodnością, stanowi oś proponowanego artykułu.

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Słowa kluczowe

literatura, pamięć, tożsamość, Tóibín, Enright