Transgenerational and Intergenerational Family Trauma in Colm Tóibín's *The Blackwater Lightship* and "Three Friends"[1]

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Abstract
This article analyzes Colm Tóibín's *The Blackwater Lightship* (1999) and his short story "Three Friends" (2006), which are clearly the testimony of the changes affecting current Ireland, especially those concerning the roles and engagement between females and gays. Drawing on Abraham's and Torok's *The Shell and the Kernel* (1994), my main contention is that Tóibín's texts explore the trans-generational transmission of trauma and memory in an Irish context. Also, Gabriele Schwab's *Haunting Legacies* (2010), which explains the transference and haunting of trauma from both Holocaust victims and perpetrators to their descendants, will give a fuller understanding of *The Blackwater Lightship* and "Three Friends". I will demonstrate that different generations of Irish women, or Irish women and their (gay) sons hurt one another, being both victims and perpetrators. This paper also analyzes the effectiveness of the language of trans/inter-generational memory and conflict, especially when paradoxically transmitted through strategic silences and meaningful gaps. Thus, Tóibín's texts look at the past and how it is codified and transmitted at a family level to eventually herald a message of renewal.
Keywords: Transgenerational and intergenerational trauma, family, Irish memory, postmemory

1. Introduction

"All happy families resemble one another, each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way" are the opening words of Tolstoi's *Anna Karenina*. After reading Colm Tóibín's fiction and criticism, it seems all Irish families are alike in their unhappiness (McCourt 2008: 149). In *New Ways to Kill your Mother* (2012) he delves into the problematic relations between writers and their families. The first half of the book deals with Irish cases, from the Jameses to contemporary authors like Roddy Doyle and Hugo Hamilton. The other half focuses on authors "elsewhere". For writers, Tóibín argues, their fathers (and mothers) constitute an "overwhelming presence while alive" (2012: 33). About Ivan Karamazov's quote "Who doesn't desire his father's death?", he points out: "From the Urals to Donegal the theme recurs, in Turgenev, in Samuel Butler, in Gosse. [Though] it is especially prominent in Ireland" (33).

Drawing on Irish tradition, I contend that Tóibín's *The Blackwater Lightship* (1999) and *Mothers and Sons* (2006) exorcise their characters from a (respectively) transgenerational and Oedipal haunting, which explains their introjected discourse,

memory and imagery. The writer does so to rearticulate the affects repressed through generations of women and between mothers and (gay) sons and thus set up and embrace a new Irish status quo. With this purpose I will make reference to Gabriele Schwab's *Haunting Legacies* (2010), Nicolas Abraham's and Maria Torok's *The Shell and the Kernel* (1994), memory studies, particularly Marianne Hirsch's concept of "postmemory", and, briefly, to Julia Kristeva's "Chora" and "abject". Tóibín's writing is not only a mirror of Ireland today. It is rather an active site of conflict, reconciliation and reparation, if that is feasible. The writer relies on ambiguity to come to terms with an anxious new Ireland (in Delaney 2008: 14) that addresses, updates and is haunted by an asphyxiating tradition and memory. Obviously, it does not mean tradition should be discarded. Yet, no matter how traumatic the process may be, the haunting ghosts encrypted in community, family, and individual memory must be cancelled out for renewal to succeed. With this purpose Tóibín insists on using ambiguity, (strategic) silence, and the (post)Oedipal as formulae to render current Irish identity, family and nationalism. I have chosen *The Blackwater Lightship* because it is the first of his novels to deal with the conflict between gayness and family in a fully Irish setting; and, more concretely, because it tackles the trans/inter-generational transmission of affects such as shame and guilt that Irish women suffer and must cope with to re-articulate the family. As concerns *Mothers and Sons*, Tóibín's first collection of short stories, also addresses the transmission of discord. This time, however, it is not the transgenerational conflict of women, but the (post)Oedipal/Choratic tension between mothers and gay sons that is addressed. Besides secrecy, silence, memory, ambiguity, loss, absence, trauma, oedipal/anti-oedipal, renewal and gayness, it is the affects of shame and guilt that inform the inarticulacy the writer considers consubstantial to Irishness and the Irish family.

Tóibín belongs to a liminal generation (Delaney, 16; Böss 2005: 23), an inbetweenness that determines his literary and political discourse. Being brought up in a family involved in Irish nationalism and the Revisionism which, from the 1960s to the 1990s, "challenged national myths in favor of supposedly objective historical studies" (Delaney, 8), the writer is rather ambiguous when dealing with Irish (post)memory and its political use(s). In a country where "the past was claimed as a mandate for political action" (Whelan 2004: 179), Tóibín's discourse constitutes a breakthrough. In his interview with Lynne Tillman, he points out: "What all of us want, I suppose, more than anything, is to be able to escape from history. … In Ireland, it's a big issue. I want to be through with history. I want it all over. Start again with our lives" (1992: 22). He has gone beyond with this idea of "being through with history", considering "Irish history [as] pure fiction" (1993: 3). Tóibín even celebrates the subversiveness of devising "a new way of killing [the] father, starting from scratch, creating a new self" (3). No matter how transgressive his words are, the writer elicits an engaging and responsible awareness of the past and the politics of memory to reconfigure the present. He foregrounds new formulae to render Irishness(es), no longer restricted to Catholicism, patriarchy and hatred towards (Anglican) colonizers. His fiction is not restricted to providing a simplistic

view of British imperialism and the numerous cases of pedophile priests. Tóibín escapes morbidity and basic explanations to support his political theses both within and outside his texts. Even the nineteenth-century famine, perhaps the most traumatic episode in Irish history, is tackled from a polyhedral standpoint to reach a more authentic (i.e. comprehensive) approach. The writer favors memory (as lived experience) over history (as a logocentric discourse) to access the past and its multidirectional rapport with the present. Drawing on Michael Rothberg's "multidirectional memory", whereby the Holocaust can shed new light on postcolonial traumata and vice versa (2009), so old and new Irish traumata can do with one another. Thus Tóibín's literary discourse enters the intricate terrain of memory. Precisely when memory studies are being questioned after a two-decade-long boom, his texts rely on them as an instrument to move forward rather than remain in a complacent comfort zone (Bell, 2006). His conception of memory contests a biased instrumentalization for political purposes, as, he hints, is the case of Irish Revisionism. If at all, Tóibín regards memory as "a source of fractured national, ideological and cultural forms, forms which are resistant to coherent reconstructions" (Winter 2006: 55). In other words, he fosters an ambiguous conception of Irishness relying on "subjectivities, hybridities, multiple subject positions" (Winter, 55). Although Tóibín's fiction addresses the country's traumatic coming to terms with itself, it is the family context of what Aleida Assmann calls "individual memory and family/group memory" (in Hirsch 2012: 110) that constitutes the main concern of the writer and of this paper.

2. Transgenerational trauma in (Irish) context.

Both *The Blackwater Lightship* and *Mothers and Sons* focus on the structural trauma and memory of the Irish family. Although an a priori valuable institution from religious, social, political, ethical and economic viewpoints, Tóibín's families are often overwhelming, the site of conflict, individual emasculation, powerlessness and psychic arrest. Despite being in crisis, the family still deserves attention, as his texts' scrutiny of parents (particularly mothers) and their sons and daughters prove. Jay Winter argues that even "the growth and … viability of museums and fiction set in the wars … is to see them as places where family stories are located in a wider, at times universal context" (69). Hence, although Tóibín's revision of the family and memory responds to a concern that goes well beyond Ireland, he rearticulates it in the context of the country. Roger Luckhurst addresses the danger of traumatic memory leaking between mental and physical symptoms, between patients, patients and doctors, between victims and their listeners and patients (in Krockel 2011: 23). In my view, Luckhurst overlooks the leaking through and between generations which, as the paper will show, is crucial to understand *The Blackwater Lightship* and *Mothers and Sons* respectively.

Drawing on Nicolas Abraham (1994), Ruth Kluger (2001) and Ishmael Beah (2007), Gabriele Schwab raises "the question of how both victims and perpetrators pass on the ineradicable legacies of violent histories through generations" (2011: 1). The critic calls "haunting legacies" those events whose very violence "holds an

unrelenting grip on memory [and] yet is deemed unspeakable" (1). Such events are transmitted between and through generations of victims who are thus haunted by such and who try to repress them. As traumatic episodes, they are unspeakable by definition, as "Abraham envisions a *crypt*" (1) where they are buried. This is particularly the case with violent losses. Sometimes the victim is able to mourn through introjection. However, when the victim refuses to mourn, s/he "incorporates the lost object by disavowing the loss, thus keeping the object 'alive' inside" (1). It is my contention that *Blackwater Lightship* and, to a lesser extent, *Mothers and Sons* address this psychic entombment of traumas in individual/family memory (somehow linked to so-called national Irish memory) and integrate them in literary form. The process is particularly complex because Tóibín's characters are, as will be shown, both victims and perpetrators. Related to Abraham's *crypt* is Jacques Derrida's cryptonymy, "a traumatic designification of language to ward off intolerable pain" (4), which affects most of these characters. The crypts in language bury signification, refusing mourning as if they were "the linguistic scars of trauma" (4). The unmourned returns as a phantom or revenant which, as Esther Rashkin points out, "can peregrinate in several directions and inhabit strangers as well as family members" (1992: 10). The secret is phantomed, encrypted, rendered unspeakable and hence silenced through generations. The trope of silence signposts the psychic scars of Tóibín's characters and their transgenerational rapport. These scars are transferred to his writing into, Paul Delaney recalls: "Occlusions, omissions and erasures; aphasia, the limits of what can be said, and the withholding of speech; the acts of recovery and remembrance" (2008: 13). The writer's austere style responds not only to the ambiguity he fashions to reconcile Irish problematic identity and history as embodied in its families. His "monkish prose" (O'Faoláin, 1992: 19) and formal economy answers to the poetics of trauma. Silence is the crypt that bears witness to absence and/or loss, be it the nineteenth-century famine, the IRA, or sexual repression under Catholicism. Tóibín's silences are active and meaningful, strategic acts of "not saying, or choosing not to say" (Delaney, 20).

Although some critics may claim trauma rhetoric and committed silence to be ineffective, (Tóibín's) literature constitutes a transformational object. When properly used, silence (as part of communication) relies on remembering and forgetting, both being necessary acts of memory itself. In fact, trauma in Tóibín's characters is not only healed through inter or transgenerational confession, but by eliciting strategic forgetfulness. Addressing Civil War, Ona Frawley points out: "For a divided community to move forward … acts of forgetting must occur" (2008: 78). Tóibín's families being at Civil War with themselves, the balance between saying and forgetting seems necessary. His texts revamp the concepts of memory and identity from being solid and irrefutable, as Revisionism argues, to ambiguous and in crisis. Concepts such as "postmemory", "transference", "narrative fetishism" and "screen memory", and "psychic splitting" make up for the transgenerational working-through of guilt and shame the female protagonists of *The Blackwater Lightship* go through. In my view, these characters incorporate the culture of guilt and shame consubstantial to Irish "cultural memory", which are surreptitiously

transmitted across the generations. The mainstream sense of shame for having been violently used by British imperialism is just part of the story. Tóibín also recalls the violence used both by Irish Catholics and Protestants against each other: hence the directionality of perpetration and victimhood must be revised to be accurate and fair, apart from politically-biased memory. His characters rely on Jan Assmann's "communicative remembrance", which corresponds to Aleida Assmann's "individual and family memory" (in Hirsch, 110), for their articulation of identity. Tóibín's families are mostly problematic because traumatic legacies have been/are being transmitted to the new generation through silences enmeshed in language. The old generation is not only guilt-ridden for transmitting crypted traumata. It is also haunted by the shame of colonial submission and religious repression. In this sense the intergenerational memory/trauma that parents "communicate" to their children overlaps with the transgenerational transmission in a culture through symbols or archives: Tóibín's texts deal with both. The different generations of women in the Devereux family in *The Blackwater Lightship* transmit the insidious trauma of being female and Irish.[2] Recrimination, as well as guilt and shame, are bidirectional in Tóibín's radiography of contemporary Irish families. In this light, Gabriele Schwab's approach to transgenerational trauma in post-War Germany proves to be particularly useful. Besides Jewish shame as Holocaust victims, the critic delves into the neglected case of perpetrators' descendants, the guilt-ridden second-generation of Germans. Obviously, neither Schwab nor I are equating the traumas of ones and others. However, in both cases, the fact that traumatic experiences are hidden and thus remain unresolved prevents a proper working-though, as Hannah Arendt already addressed (1968: 186-97). In Arendt's view, as colonial violence was not resolved, fascisms found a fertile scenario to grow because the "collective and communal silencing of violent histories leads to the involuntary repetition of cycles of violence" (in Schwab, 32). Tóibín's fiction deals with the cycles of violence governing Irish memory and trauma; though my interest is mostly focused on insidious trauma. By insidious trauma I mean the one that escapes grand narratives and affects individuals' everyday lives instead. The trauma of being discriminated for being a woman, a gay or a lesbian in Catholic Ireland, the victim of domestic violence in a patriarchal culture, a Jew in Nazi Germany, or an Irish under British imperial rule remains hidden because it is intertwined with cultural givens which are hard to expunge.

This paper does not only focus on the current Irish family as a source of discord, but also of prospective reconciliation and/or renewal. Thus, the monumentalization of memory and its politics of reparation and rehabilitation are transformed in Tóibín's texts into a plain family act which puts forward the complex poetics and balance between remembering and forgetting (Whitehead 2009: 156-157). His

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[2] I do not endorse Susan Faludi's view whereby current American feminism does not move forward because mothers and daughters keep fighting and demeaning each other (2010). It is precisely their difference that society is experiencing and that current feminism must address.

conception of family is politically correct though, pushing the boundaries of the socially and morally accepted and acceptable, namely patriarchy, heterosexuality and monogamy in the case of Ireland. His fiction aims to rehabilitate contact with repressed aspects of the mind and of culture. In this sense his writing goes hand in hand with Abraham and Torok's introjection (1994: 14) and Freud's working-through. Literature, like psychoanalysis, gives voice to silence, which is rather paradoxical, to say the least. What cannot be said because it is sealed off and encrypted as family or cultural shame is, in fact, said when it is rendered unsayable because inaccessible. That is, in the process of (un)saying, the crypt is uttered from the grave where it is buried. Abraham and Torok argue that "the obstacles to introjection include the phantom, an undisclosed family secret handed down to an unwitting descendant" (1994: 16); the transgenerational haunting legacy mentioned above. Both critics use a number of psychic mechanisms to retrieve what trauma victims or their haunted descendants repress. Among them is aforementioned cryptonymy, which "inhibits the emergence of meaning by concealing the significant link within a chain of words" (17). In other words, language is tricked against its "resistance to signification by revealing the situation (for example, a shameful or traumatic death) that led to the obstructions of meaning" (18). Drawing on Abraham and Torok, Rand points out: "Silence represents that which cannot be assimilated into the continuity of psychic life, … endangering or arresting the harmonious progress of our emotional development and self-expansion" (21-22). My main contention is that Tóibín's discourse both challenges and endorses this view. Silence, interrupted/failed discourse, and strategic forgetting are valuable defensive strategies − as it is ambiguity (Tóibín 1993: 6) − to come to terms with the past, family shame and guilt, individual and collective memory, and insidious trauma. However, communication is not entirely broken, but purposefully short-circuited. That is, Tóibín's literary discourse is scattered with gaps enriching and shedding light on the words uttered by narrators and characters.

3. *The Blackwater Lightship*: A Tale of Female Trans-generational Haunting

The Blackwater Lightship is a macabre tale of death and survival because the continuation and renaissance of the Devereux family metaphorically relies on the death of Declan, one of its members. Declan is a gay youth who returns home a victim of AIDS. There he meets his sister Helen, his mother Lily, and his grandmother Dora. With Declan's arrival the irreconcilable differences of the three women come out. Along the novel the young man is but a living corpse that bears witness (and eventually the solution) to his family collapse. Thus, Tóibín's concern about oedipal mother-son bonds whereby gay sons "sacrifice" the mother to release their hidden subjectivity (Walshe 2013:160), as will be shown in "Three Friends", is pushed into the background in *The Blackwater Lightship*. Declan is mostly an excuse for women to negotiate the terms of a new family model in a new Ireland. Tóibín has recurrently matched gays' history with that of the Irish, as Eve Sedgwick (1991) and Marjorie Garber (1992) –and more recently Janet Jakobsen (2003), Daniel Boyarin (2003) and Jonathan Freedman (2003)− had done with that of the

Jews. Drawing on the "strange bedfellowship" (Boyarin 2003: 1) between Irishness and gayness, as downcast others, the novel can be argued to match Ireland and motherhood. The iconography of the country as a maternal nurturing scenario ravished by British imperialism has religious and pagan connotations. Being Celtic and Catholic, against Norman-Saxon and Anglican England, Ireland has mothered generations subjected to foreign rule. Tóibín goes beyond Revisionism, though. Ireland cannot blame colonization for all its internal clashes and problems. British imperialism has obviously determined Irish history and collective memory. Nevertheless, *The Blackwater Lightship* addresses other issues, individual, affective, unfathomable, "too sharp and too deeply embedded" for the men (unlike for the women) in the novel "to fathom" (Tóibín, 119).

Declan's arrival prompts Helen's meeting her mother and grandmother and conjuring up the memory of their house which "she pictured … empty and ghostly, like a ship under the water" (118). Although the aquatic ghostly imagery of home recalls the primordial bond between mother and son/daughter, Helen makes the effort to keep her affects and her mother at bay: "She was angry with her mother, tried to feel nothing about her for years. … She remained for days in a silent rage" (119). Despite her husband Hugh's attempts to "resolve *it* by talking about *it* [as] he loved the language of emollience and reconciliation … [Helen] needed to let *it* end" (119, my emphasis). In brief, Hugh considers his wife must introject the encrypted "it" that haunts her as long as she represses it. From the beginning, the free indirect speech of the narrator enters Helen's unconscious and gives it away: "Somewhere in the part of her where fears lay unexplored and conflicts unresolved, there was a belief that the life she had made with Hugh would fail her … she would some day or night appear at her mother's door asking to be taken in and forgiven" (120). She has a guilt/shame-ridden trauma related to her mother which is impossible to decode at that point of the novel. Like the scars in Declan's body, Helen's psychic scars are simultaneously exposed and silenced, thus triggering the collapse of their family structure. The distance between mother and daughter also applies to their relation to grandmother Dora. Helen recalls a visit to Cush −where Dora still lives− when she and her brother were children. The old woman was "as uncomfortable as they were, her routine destroyed by these two half-strange interlopers" (121). Stereotypes are broken, the women of the family being disengaged from children they are scarcely familiar with. Women are also given the liberty of being free from the males in the family. Yet, it is precisely the loss of men (I will return to this later), among other factors, that triggers the haunting legacy these women transmit through generations.

Trying to escape from Irish entrenched traditions, Helen decided to distance herself and her family from her mother and grandmother. The silence among and within these women is as aching as necessary and entrenched. Only Declan's imminent death redirects the course of events, opening these women to the face of the other (in Lévinas's terms). After Declan's friend Paul tells his coming-out story to Helen, she opens her heart, though her discourse is full of silences. She feels compelled to do so after Paul's momentous comment on her family's

miscommunication and silence: "Wow, there must be something between the three of you, something …" (184). What Paul cannot grasp is the logic that articulates these women's code of suffering, which is derived from the transference of surreptitious memory. Related to transgenerational haunting is Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory whereby memory (particularly traumatic episodes) is alleged to be transmitted through uncanny silence(s). Drawing on Hirsch, Oona Frawley says about postmemory: "Even if we lack personal experience of a given event, we nonetheless inherit it through our families and communities memories" (2008: 70). Thus, the women in the novel not only reprimand acts from each other consciously. There is an undercurrent of acts, affects and traumata transmitted unconsciously through generations that help explain these characters' mutual detachment and their recrimination of their ancestors. Their communication through generations depends on memory, on how the past has been given shape and transmitted through time. However, apart from the "possibilities of continuity" of memory, "there is a great deal of discontinuity … fissures and chasms … gaps and silences" (Frawley, 70). Helen, Lily and Dora have incorporated (not introjected) the lost object (be it their dead husbands or affective bonds with their children) "by disavowing the loss, thus keeping the object 'alive' inside" (Shwab, 1). The inner object must be finally externalized, though. Declan's disease and Paul's confession constitute turning-points for Helen and, therefore, for her female ancestry: "There was something now that she needed to put words on, something she needed to hear herself saying" (186). Helen's working-through thus relies on psychic splitting. She somehow dissociates from herself, being the narrator and spectator of (and hence bearing witness to) her own saying. Although she tells Paul things about her mother and grandmother, she purposefully silences and/or forgets some in her confession: "There are others I left out that are harder to understand" (186). Thus starts Helen's exorcism of her encrypted phantoms, the gaps that have always haunted her:

> I had put away parts of myself that were damaged and left them rotting. When my father died, half my world collapsed, but I did not know this had happened. … Maybe the damage was already done, but I got no comfort or consolation from them. And these two women are the parts of myself that I have buried. … My mother taught me never to trust anyone's love [and] I associated love with loss. … The only way I could live with Hugh and bring up my children was to keep my mother and grandmother away from me. (187-88)

Helen's confession is not only an individual exorcism, but a much more complex process. Tóibín's text suggests "the existence within an individual of a collective psychology comprised of several generations" (Abraham and Torok, 166). In this sense, the novel features Helen as the recipient of so-called (female) community memory, whereby, for instance, traumatic episodes are transmitted from victims/perpetrators to their descendants. However, she challenges the role she is appointed by the text because she is primarily concerned with the insidious traumata affecting the women of her own family. She expresses her pain and shame which she has been transmitted phantasmatically from her ancestors, as has happened through generations of Irish women. A wide range of terms has been devised to

delve into the postness whereby a generation or an individual are transmitted "massive traumatic events" by the previous one, Hirsch's "postmemory" (105) being a particularly useful one. Helen (like her mother and grandmother before) is not transmitted an "official" massive trauma, but a domestic one, ignored by mainstream discourses and narratives. The three generations of women of *The Blackwater Lightship* do not transmit the experience of others or other families. They transfer knowledge and memory from one generation to the next at a family level. However, they represent *en-abyme* what has happened and happens with generations of Irish women. On giving birth to females, the characters transmit and are transmitted an identity in which the trauma of lack and shame are inherent. It is not an event that is transmitted through ordinary discourse (which for critics like Ernst Van Alphen is unfeasible [2006: 485-86]), but through these women's selves.

Hirsch does not obviously consider the possibility of "literal memories" (109). It is rather the emanation transmitted through "the language of the body" that she addresses and that can be applied to Tóibín's characters. In Jan and Aleida Assmann's typologies of memory, individual/family memory is communicative and, therefore, intergenerational, whereas national/cultural memory is transgenerational. In *The Blackwater Lightship* the limits between both are blurred. It is silences and gaps that characterize the (mis)communication between the three women. Yet, since the trauma that characterizes their identity and discourse is intrinsic −as far as transmitted memory− their silences are not simply passed from one generation to the next but encrypted in the fact of being born (and raised) Catholic Irish females.

The family generates a language where nonverbal and cognitive acts are transferred in and through generations (Hirsch, 112). Such language also engenders healing narratives. For Hirsch, photography is one of these family narratives which are embedded in "a collective imaginary shaped by public, generational structures of fantasy and projection and by a shared archive of stories and images that inflect the transmission of individual and family remembrance" (114). In Tóibín's novel it is not photographs that work as "ghostly revenants from an irretrievable lost past world" (115). It is in these women's bodies and experience where trauma is imprinted through averbal family language and from which it must be removed. Helen's healing discourse is in line with Eric L. Santner's "narrative fetishism". With this term, he addresses "the construction and deployment of a narrative consciously or unconsciously designed to expunge the trauma or loss that called that narrative into being in the first place" (in Schwab, 10). Santner, Schawb recalls, devised "narrative fetishism" as a tool for Germans to deal with impossible mourning in the post-Nazi era. They had to "constitute their 'Germanness' in the awareness of the horrors generated by a previous production of national and cultural identity" (10). If post-Nazi-generation Germans have to deal with the transgenerational guilt syndrome, Helen, like Jewish victims, has to confront the shame and guilt buried one generation after another within her family: the shame of suffering under the rule of the English, the church and Irish patriarchy (212), and the guilt of transmission itself.

The family psychology and memory Helen has (been) encrypted responds to Tóibín's conception of "historical" discourse. Far from classic positivist historiography, the writer appeals to memory, a more affective engagement with the past to address the future. This view, however, has gained him criticism for being a "liberal post-nationalist" and at war with the past (Foster, 2008: 23). In my view, Helen's disengaging and re-engaging narrative puts an end to "phantomatic haunting" and endorses Tóibín's textual claim to renew the concept of Irishness. Distancing from her mother and grandmother helps Helen to edify a longer and healthier bond with her husband and children. Thus, the male figure is no longer an obstacle for female assertion, as it was for Lily and Dora. And their widowhood −which is mandatory for their/Irish renewal process− does not apply to the new generation of the family. In short, Helen eventually cancels out the transgenerational migration of the phantom.

The reader is not made aware of the real reason for Helen's hatred towards her mother until late in the story. Her mother, Helen complains, was distant and gave her no affection (210). This only increased when her father fell ill and both Helen and Declan felt abandoned (211). What at first sight seems a classic exchange of reproaches on both sides is, as always in Tóibín's, more complex. Their psychic battle is a problematic one where Helen splits from her ancestry once more. Her disassociation from her mother and her memory focuses on the day her father died: "There was a scene especially which haunted her [Helen] … beyond her understanding … that day when she [Lily] came from Dublin with her husband's body" (214). She can only cope with her mother's detachment by psychic splitting, disassociating from her remembrance: "Those days after her father's death were dream-days, as though captured on badly processed film … her mother was at the centre of the strangeness, utterly placid … her daughter watched her from the bottom of the stairs" (215). Helen misunderstands her mother's mourning as ine(a)ffective and guilty. She blames her for having "locked [his father] away somewhere" (245). It is not only that Helen is devoid of her father as a physical presence but also and, more importantly, of the possibility to mourn him. The male body (diseased or a corpse in *The Blackwater Lightship*) is fetishized by remaining women. Around Declan's dying body and in the absence of Dora's and Lily's husbands, they negotiate the terms of a new *status quo*. Although Helen is given prominence as the ultimate recipient of transgenerational haunting, Lily utters her guilt/shame-ridden personality (as a hinge between her mother and daughter) through discourse gaps. Both generations are thus related through the phantom which "indicates the effects on the descendants of something that had inflicted narcissistic injury … on the parents" (Abraham and Torok, 174). The loss of the father or husband is too heavy a burden for the women in the novel to overcome except through mutual (mis)understanding in the form of healing gaps and painful working-through. Eventually Lily explains the inarticulacy of affectiveness and language she suffered at his husband's death. It is a repressed memory she is forced to act out once and again: "Coming home like that from Dublin and your father so young, and everybody looking and watching, there was a sort of shame about it. …

So exposed … . But it felt like shame" (244). Lily's feeling is unfathomable. It addresses the problematic position of a woman who "fails" to keep her husband alive; a complex mixture of guilt (for "letting" him die) and shame (for being socially unfit) that she must cope with on behalf of the new generation.

Helen's rapport with her grandmother is not only inarticulate but, primarily, phobic (142). Dora is a distant, almost uncanny figure for both her daughter and granddaughter. Drawing on Freud's analysis of the atavistic fear of wolves, Abraham and Torok conclude this phobia "often referred to a grandparent through the mother's own unconscious fear of her mother. She fears that her mother might castrate her in the sense that she would prevent her from becoming a mother in turn" (181). This would explain why, as mentioned above, Helen keeps both her mother and grandmother at bay to successfully perform as a wife and thus close the circle. She aims to avoid the shame of not becoming a Mother as part of Irish normative traditions. Abraham and Torok link Freud's original theory on the phobia of wolves to their own on the phantom. The unconscious connection of these women relies not only on guilt and shame, as claimed so far, but also on fear: "Phobia-inducing phantoms haunt in order to move the haunted persons to expose a concealed and unspoken paternal fear" (181). Haunted by her female ancestors' fear of lacking a male figure, being exposed socially, and failing as nurturing mothers (hence the symbolism of mammal wolves), Helen however forces their/her repressed fears out.

To disassociate from the traumata of Dora and Lily, which are her own, Helen performs a complex psychic process, mostly by displacing their presence through a "screen trauma". The Holocaust has often been used as a screen memory "in the American imaginary … to confront racism and genocide in a displaced setting" (Abraham and Torok, 22). Likewise, *The Blackwater Lightship* transfers the three female protagonists' traumatic bonds into Declan's AIDS. In other words, they pass their psychic and linguistic scars onto him, which become manifest metaphorically in the scars of his illness. The deterioration of his body into a virtually living corpse (1999: 155, 204-5, 213, 221, 252-7), a living metaphor of the phantom encrypted in family memory, intersperses with the three women's transgenerational conflicts. Thus, homosexuality and disease work as the "screen trauma" the novel requires for healing. Although homosexuality was decriminalized in Ireland in 1993 (the year the novel is set in), Declan is identified with the criminality attached to AIDS. His sexual identity, Eibhear Walshe argues, "is subsumed by his illness" (2013: 92). Tóibín belongs to a liminal generation which did not grow with (yet decidedly supports) queer movements. Hence, despite his depicting a new Ireland, sexual dissidence in *The Blackwater Lightship* is still a "foreign" criminalized issue in the country. This is particularly so in the rural counties of Wexford and Cush, where Lily and Dora live and Declan returns to close his vital circle.

Larry's coming-out story is remarkable because it pushes forward Helen's working-through of her (family) traumata. Unlike Anglo-Saxon coming-outs, Larry's is decidedly Irish, a laconic Catholic-like confession. Instead of self-affirmation, his act looks one of denial. In just one page he refuses to utter himself once and again: "I couldn't say it … I couldn't tell her [his mother] … I couldn't

tell him [his father] … I couldn't say anything" (145). These discourse gaps lead his mother to misinterpret his signals, asking him if he has joined the IRA (145). Being hilarious, her words are illuminating because they indirectly identify gayness with terrorist action, which recalls once more the link between Irishness, homosexuality, Jewishness, criminality and otherness. The political and ethical implications of this analogy are as destabilizing as far-reaching for a conservative society in process of change. They also re-confirm the transgenerational haunting of the past over the present. The gay community in Ireland has been historically silent and silenced. And when given the chance, gays (like female characters in *The Blackwater Lightship*) perform a quasi-religious confession which reformulates conventional gay coming-outs. Though politically necessary, these confessional acts have forced Irish gays out of the "safe" closet they have been confined to. For Larry, homosexuality is more easily articulated in the darkness of a confession box. Hence, he jokes: "It's easier to talk like this in the dark. … It's like confession" (147). Paradoxically same-sex desire and Irish Catholicism make up strange bedfellows, being both repressed from "abroad" yet needing articulation. In *Love in a Dark Time* (2002), Tóibín also addresses the literary merits gained by gays in the closet. The writer nonetheless opens the doors of the closet ajar as well as those of the confession box to the light of the lighthouse of the title. The transgenerational haunting of guilt and shame transmitted and encrypted by generations of gays (and Irish women) is shed some light. And, with Declan's death, it seems to come to an end. The novel indirectly suggests his nephew Manus can be gay. He is the opposite, his mother says, of his older brother Cathal who is "like the men down here, he loves not having to talk" (243). Thus, once Declan is dead, a new generation of gays will allegedly find their way into the future.

Like Declan's death, women's (uneven) working-through proves to be therapeutic. As the end approaches, there seems to be a timid reconciliation between Helen and Lily back in their mother land. Lily confesses to Helen that her mother Dora also wears her out and that, in consequence, she wants to stop the chain of pain: "Now that you and I are talking again I don't want to do that to you" (273). They apparently find a way (albeit a weak one) to rearticulate their roles and cancel out the transgenerational phantom by speaking, silencing and forgetting at the same time. Helen and Lily speak but also obliterate things to move forward. In the next section I will briefly deal with the intergenerational conflict between mother and gay son in "Three Friends", only nuanced and mostly repressed in *The Blackwater Lightship*. If Ireland and motherhood are strongly linked in the novel, so are Ireland and gayness in the short story.

4. "Three Friends": Gayness and the Death of the Mother
Like *The Blackwater Lightship*, *Mothers and Sons* deals with "unfulfilment, death, absence and familial fragmentation" (McCourt 2008: 149). However, in the latter, fragmentation is mostly post-Oedipal (Fogarty 2008: 167-181), all the stories exploring variations on the conflict between mothers and sons. The father remains a redundant figure, absent throughout the collection. Whereas *The Blackwater*

Lightship attempts to come to terms with what it takes to be a woman in current Ireland as the recipient of a transgenerational haunting legacy, the short stories delve into what it takes for mothers and sons to engage intergenerationally and affectively. Thus, the paper moves from trauma memory in the novel into (post)Oedipal trauma in *Mothers and Sons*.

Male characters in *Mothers and Sons* hold precarious identities, being haunted by the loss of the mother, her compelling presence, or their desire to escape and to re-engage with the maternal space. This (post)Oedipal oxymoron only increases when sons happen to be gay. In these cases, Fogarty points out, under "the trope of the dead, absent or erring mother, they set out to queer family relations and to rewrite and disturb traditional Oedipal plots" (172). When Helen asks Declan whether he desired to sleep with his mother and kill his father, he answers: "No, no … gay boys want the opposite" (9). Challenging the Freudian Oedipus, whereby boys must reject the maternal on their way into maturity, Tóibín's (gay) male characters return "to the place of primal engagement with the engulfing mother" (Fogarty, 174). The return of/from the Oedipal is however ambivalent and problematic for gay sons. The mother-son bond is not liberating for either of them and particularly difficult for the son, as "the secluded, hostile space of the maternal becomes the locus in which all the conflicts engendered by the family are reinforced and in which the insidious effects of homophobia inscribe themselves" (177). Some sons in the collection elude and return to Kristeva's "semiotic Chora", a chaotic space that "is and becomes a precondition for creating the first measurable bodies" (1977: 57) before mother and son split. This is particularly the case of "Three Friends" and "A Long Winter" which delve into the interaction between gay youths and their haunting absent mothers more overtly. Ones and others repeatedly re-present their separation at the end of the Chora, the moment when their original unity is broken, the son fears the fall into the pre-linguistic and faces up the abject (Kristeva, 1986: 95). In both stories, the "the death of the[ir] mother[s] enables [their] either suppressed or enacted gay desire to be fulfilled" (Walshe 2013: 162); hence, the ambiguous nature of Tóibín's post-Oedipal discourse, which equates these characters' desire with their desire to escape (160). In what remains I will focus on how the gay protagonist allegedly achieves selfhood after a post-Oedipal ritual of resurrection −which recalls infants' post-Choratic abjection− in "Three Friends". I have deliberately not included the short story "A Long Winter" because, although equally relevant for the Tóibínesque post-Oedipal metaphor, it is not set in Ireland, but rather in the Pyrenees.

Unlike the crossroads of transgenerational and intergenerational memory in *The Blackwater Lightship*, "Three Friends" deals exclusively with the intergenerational emasculating bond between mother and son; concretely once the former dies and the latter releases same-sex desire. The story turns around Fergus's mourning process immediately after his mother's death. It opens featuring Fergus alone "with his mother's body in the funeral parlor" (Tóibín 2006: 185). While in the parlor, a young man turns up. The nature of the visit remains unknown and rather confusing. It is as if the mother's death elicited Fergus's psychic splitting, the visitor

−nameless, never described, disembodied (188)− being a mirror image of the protagonist. The visit is phantasmatic in more than one sense. Fergus feels that this Other comes "to take his mother's spirit" (188). Moreover, time during the visit escapes common chronology (187). The phantom that links and sets him apart from his mother's corpse eventually disappears once Fergus's family returns, which only reinforces the idea that this Other is a spectral presence the protagonist self-projects. However, unlike the Hamletian phantom Abraham and Torok make reference to when dealing with haunting crypts (187-206), Fergus's hallucination has healing effects. Mourning thus starts, the mother's corpse being still present. Fergus's encounter with his mother draws on Kristeva's post-Choratic abject for two reasons. The scene stages the point when the limit between pairs like subject and object, mother and son, and unity and fragmentation break down. Moreover, the mother's corpse recalls Kristeva's waste material as "cadere, cadaver" (1984: 3), which elicits the abject reaction and separation of the son. The reiterative process of confrontation between generations is as intricate as it is in *The Blackwater Lightship*, and in both cases Tóibín finds the narrative to render the characters' aporias. Like the females of the novel, Fergus feels "a gnawing guilt" (191), as happens with the infant trying to split from the maternal Chora and the abject to enter the Symbolic stage. However, whereas Helen somehow reconciles with her mother, grandmother and her female ancestors by proxy, Fergus feels compelled (and manages) to get away from his mother's house, grave and funeral (191). Being a gay son, as mentioned above, the process is especially problematic. He feels concerned about the abject presence of the mother. Thus, the equation motherhood-Irishness-gayness, hinted at in *The Blackwater Lightship*, seems to be cancelled out with Fergus mother's death and his disassociation and mourning. After the funeral he finds comfort in his three friends (hence the title) Mick, Alan and Conal. His friends and drugs soon replace his mother's nurturing role and Choratic sense of unity. With Ecstasy, joints, and cocaine (all working here as substitutes for substances like wounds, sewage or shit, which elicit abject reactions), the four young men make up an umbilical bond that connects them all (197). Their symbiosis unfolds along a rave party, which helps Fergus work out his mother's death and that of his (old) self. In short, unlike *The Blackwater Lightship*, "Three friends" recasts resurrection on the mother's tomb, not on the gay son's.

    With the break of the day, Fergus experiences a new state of unconsciousness while gazing at "the first stirrings of the horizon over the sea" (198). Recalling the scene in the parlor, Fergus splits from himself bearing witness to his own insignificance: "He made himself think for a moment that he was nobody and nothing, that he had no feelings" (200). Facing the oceanic immensity and (his) nothingness at dawn, he symbolically attends his own death and renewal as Aschenbach does at the end of *Death in Venice*. The scene recalls the gay poetics of decadence and nothingness from, among others, Arthur Schopenhauer and Thomas Mann (Dollimore 2001: 173-79, 275-93). It also recalls Christ's baptism, which challenges the foundations of myth-ridden Catholic Ireland once again. Drawing on Robinson Murphy, Walshe points out how the protagonist of "Three

Friends" is reborn in a gay-friendly world (169). That is, when Fergus goes into the sea, he performs a ritual whereby he returns to the primordial aquatic scenario, akin to the mother('s uterus). Simultaneously though, the story replaces the maternal figure with Mick, and the mother-son bond with gay sex. Both men's sexual intercourse is as explicit as symbolic: "Mick was holding him, trying to enter him … inside" (202). As everything in Tóibín, sex is ambivalent: painful and thrilling (202), disengaged and nourishing. Thus, pleasure easily turns into a weird feeling through which Mick transmutes into a re-abjected version of Fergus's dead mother: "He [Fergus] began to touch Mick's face, feeling the bones, sensing the skull behind the skin and the flesh, the eye sockets, the cheekbones … the inert solidity of his teeth … the dead hair" (202). Mick stands for a revenant of the mother's phantom that haunts and, somehow, destabilizes Fergus's mourning process. The return of the mother is transient though, since Mick's body comes back to life and Fergus can bury her deep inside: "[He touched] Mick's hips, his back … then he began to direct his energy … into Mick's tongue … tasting his friend's saliva, his breath, his feral self" (202). The transmutation of the Catholic figure of the mother into a gay lover allows Fergus's healing, for he is able to overcome mourning. Fergus's self-release is therefore complete, gay sex, identity and renewal standing for and transcending the haunting legacy of the mother. It seems that homosexuality and intergenerational haunting constitute key and related issues to understand and delve into Tóibín's poetics and politics of regeneration. It is a pity though, that someone (mother or son) has to perish for another to emerge and for the writer's political project to be fulfilled.

5. Conclusion

Tóibín's is a prominent voice in Ireland today. His texts both reflect and help shape a society making its way into the future. His is a subtle revolution; one that masterly recasts a country and its founding institutions from the vantage point of fiction. His discourse is culturally, morally, and politically challenging. But, it is deeply conscientious and respectful. It updates the contested concept of memory to revamp Irishness through its individualities and their way to come to terms with the past. Tóibín's texts question Ireland from Ireland, revaluing and reformulating silence and restraint. Gaps are not necessarily missed opportunities. They can also be symptoms of non-verbal transmission of truth contained within and transcending language itself. The precarious reconciliation between Helen and Lily is only possible after mastering the liminal territory of communication between language and silence: "They sat in silence, listening to the waves sweeping in towards the shore. Eventually, Helen spoke" (243).

  The Blackwater Lightship casts the transgenerational insidious trauma and sense of shame that Irish females have (been) transmitted through generations. Paradoxically, shame for inheriting powerlessness adds to the guilt syndrome derived from transferring that shame. In the end, the chain of pain, haunting, and memory comes to an end (albeit precariously) in the symbolic act of reconciliation over the dying gay body of Declan. In "Three Friends" homoeroticism is no longer

sacrificed, but released. Yet, this only happens when the post-Oedipal conflict between mother and gay son is solved with the former's death or is substituted by gay intercourse, which recalls and rejects the Chora and its abject aftermath. In any case, characters in *The Blackwater Lightship* and "Three Friends" open or are forced to open wounds so that they will eventually heal thanks to the texts' ambiguity and mastery of (mis)communication within the family. As survivors, Helen and Fergus prove to be resilient by overcoming, re-appropriating and recasting memory and trauma. They make up an Irish blues at the expense of their brother and mother respectively. However, the change they herald seems promising. With the precision of a surgeon, Tóibín opens the wounds of Irishness from the inside. Thus, his texts come as an answer, as well as a catalyst, to ethical/social dilemmas the country must confront; particularly those deriving from re-appropriating the pain, discrimination and silences of women and gays. *The Blackwater Lightship* and "Three Friends" link Ireland, motherhood and gayness together to make up a new whole from its renewed components. That said, the shadow of the absent (heterosexual) male looms in the horizon and continues haunting Tóibín's characters' (r)evolution. In a sense, post-catholic mothers and gay sons are still outcasts in the territory Tóibín has devised for them. However, and despite the traces of an overwhelming tradition, his texts expose what has been hidden behind layers of pretention, disguise, resentment and animosity to close (so far) the circle of trauma haunting for generations and the (post)Oedipal logic governing mother-son bonds.

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