



“He’s Been Wanting to Say That for a Long Time”: Varieties of Silence in Colm Tóibín’s Fiction

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In *The Magician* (2021), a fictional account of Thomas Mann’s life and literary inspirations, Colm Tóibín has his protagonist reflect upon the importance of silence in artistic creation, when Mann attends a music rehearsal of Gustav Mahler in his role as an orchestra conductor:

Gustav Mahler began to take the players in the orchestra through a quiet passage, getting a total silence (...) What he was looking for, his movements suggested, would not be achieved by large gestures. Instead, it was about raising the music from nothing, having the players become alert to what was there before they started to play (...) There was something mysterious and unresolved in the music, a striving for effect and then

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a melody that exuded a solitary delicacy, sometimes sad and tentative, displaying a talent that was tactful, at ease. (91–2)

Tóibín’s references to Mahler’s aesthetics of musical silence resonate with his own literary practice. As I will discuss, the writer similarly strives for powerful but subtle effects through silences that convey complex emotional states—like indecision, divided loyalties or the undertows of grief or regret—which cannot be easily expressed or even understood, and thus become more accurately represented through absences, gestures and indirection. For silence to work that way in prose, Tóibín says, it has to add “shadow and dimension”, enacting a kind of “counterlife” to what has been said (D’Erasmus 2011, 168). Stylistically, Tóibín’s use of silence takes its bearings from Henry James’s handling of topics like secrecy and subterfuge, Ernest Hemingway’s minimalist prose, James Joyce’s “scrupulous meanness”, and Elizabeth Bishop’s and Thom Gunn’s poeticism. Tóibín’s appreciation of Bishop’s and Gunn’s poetry illustrates their particular influence on his own writing, when he remarks that their poems “move constantly between tones and textures that loosen and tighten and loosen again, which speak clearly and then hush and quieten more” (Tóibín 2014, 442). In Tóibín’s texts, too, variations of this type give a slower tempo to crucial moments and situations, and tend to develop an awareness of what had been repressed until then, even though a sense of ambiguity and uncertainty often lingers in most of his stories.

In articles and interviews, Tóibín has repeatedly declared that, as a fiction writer, one of his main interests is to “work through silence” and “enter the minds of [his] characters” (Tóibín 2017), creating a tone that vividly recreates the intricacies, secrecies and contradictoriness of the self, all this in relation to the complex web of society and interpersonal relationships. In Tóibín’s canon, silence highlights the tensions between revelation and concealment, emotional release and reticence, as well as the ambiguities between knowing and unknowing, which underlie most of his characters’ dilemmas. Tóibín’s austere prose—which relies on plain statement and concise, direct observation—is misleadingly simple, as it eventually reveals deeper layers of meaning between what is said and what remains silenced. Silence—the space where energy and emotion are “insistently generated” in Tóibín’s fiction (Delaney 2008, 18)—can be perceived in the dramatisation of experiences that remain inexplicable or opaque to the self, especially at moments when, as the writer explains, the “ice crack[s] and something emerg[es] that is a true feeling” (Smith

2021). These emotional truths become the more intense and sincere because they do not have to be named, but loom large over the page, in the scene being enacted and the gaps between words.

At the same time, the silences of Tóibín’s characters—their misarticulated needs, hidden resentments, self-defensive attitudes and so on—usually foreground particular social restrictions and challenges. His work offers careful explorations of individual psychology in relation to place and culture (history, religion, politics...) and personal memory (with its gaps and occlusions, and the painful irreversibility of past wrongdoings). In much of his fiction, Tóibín has produced compelling portraits of the lives of Irish women and homosexual men in a diversity of contexts. Many of his stories focus on identities that have been marginalised, punished or strongly stereotyped, with characters who live within “constrained worlds” but seek “to achieve some sort of meaning on their own terms” (Walshe 2013, 141). For instance, in *Brooklyn* (2009) Tóibín emphasises Eilis’s (she is a young Irish woman who migrates to New York in the 1950s) unverballed desires and unsolved dilemmas, provoked by moral obligations that stifle her own independence. Similarly, *Nora Webster* (2014) depicts the eponymous protagonist’s difficult personal adjustments after her husband’s death, at a time (around the 1970s) when the culture of grief for widows imposed severe limitations on their personal freedoms. *The Testament of Mary* (2012), on its part, gives a dissenting voice to the largely silent Virgin Mary of Catholic devotion. In his reconsideration of sexual and gender identities in repressive environments, Tóibín avoids easy generalisations and offers instead insightful social commentaries on past and present.

In this study, I shall mostly concentrate on Tóibín’s use of silence in his gay writings, which generally dwell on experiences like secrecy, reserve and gloomy introspection. Tóibín’s literary imagination seems haunted by his growing up gay in conservative, Catholic Ireland, where male homosexuality only became legal in 1993, when he was nearly forty. In his book of essays *Love in a Dark Time* (2001), Tóibín recalls his adolescence in his native town of Enniscorthy, Co. Wexford, when there were rumours about the incarceration of two men who lived together, presumably, as a couple: “I remember someone whispering to me that they were queers, and then later hearing that they had been packed off to jail again for misbehaving” (265). Such climate of silence, fear and criminality unavoidably affected him as a young man who found it difficult to accept his same-sex desires. Those early experiences filter into his fiction and give

shape to one of his central ideas in *Love in a Dark Time*, which is the notion that, due to the historical silencing of homosexuality, many gays and lesbians of his generation had “gr[own] up alone”, and therefore remained unable “to work out the implications of their oppression in their early lives” (9). Many of Tóibín’s stories revolve around the implications of such silences, and the need to confront hidden traumas as the first step towards self-understanding and possible healing. Most of Tóibín’s gay characters fail to fully free themselves from a burdensome past and therefore struggle with a sense of uneasiness and duplicity when it comes to their most intimate relationships.

In his fiction, homosexual life does not feature as problem-free or a marker of modernity, but is connected with the tensions and contradictions of the evolving perceptions of sexuality in the contemporary moment. As shall be argued, Tóibín’s narratives of gaps and silences highlight the complex psychological processes involved in realities like familial homophobia or AIDS self-stigma. Additionally, Tóibín carefully explores Irish cultural legacies of sexual taboos and prejudice which, for example, affected public perceptions of the infamous Church scandals, the revelations of cases of abuse of minors by clerics. In all cases, Tóibín employs silence to point to areas of ambiguity and to insist on further consideration concerning the previously mentioned issues. In what follows, the present study shall consider the multivalent significance of silence in Tóibín’s oeuvre, from the gay subtext in his debut novel, *The South* (1990), to some of his more recent short stories.

Silence in *The South*—in *The Heather Blazing* too (1992)—has been so far studied with regard to the traumas of nationalist exclusions and sectarianism. In this study, I shall look at an alternative configuration of silence in *The South*, that is, the gay subtext (diluted in the revisions of the manuscript) that runs parallel to the story of Katherine Proctor, a Protestant woman who migrates to Spain to escape the constraints of mid-twentieth century Catholic Ireland. In *The South*, as in the celebratory “Barcelona, 1975”¹ (*The Empty Family* 2010), the author draws on his time in Barcelona between 1975 and 1978, when, after the death of dictator Franco, the cultural climate of liberty, modernity and reinvention inspired a young Tóibín to enjoy his sexuality. As he relates: “I learned very quickly, in a matter of weeks, about my own sexuality and

¹ The short story reads almost as a piece of a memoir, where a twenty-year-old Irish man initiates his sexual liberation in the Catalan capital.

what fun could be had with it” (2000, 244). One crucial trait shared by the writer and his female protagonist, Katherine, who becomes a painter in Barcelona, is their Catalan experience of freedom from previous restrictions. Paradoxically, though, Tóibín decided to set his story in the years of Franco’s dictatorship and its *nacional catolicismo*, which, like the Irish nationalism of mid-twentieth century, was characterised by highly repressive patriarchal and Catholic values.

The trope of exile is central in *The South*, and the author pays tribute here to the sexually liberating power attached to expatriation. In Barcelona, Katherine falls in love with Miguel and finds the passion that was lacking in her Irish married life. Aside from her deserted husband, Miguel is Katherine’s only lover in the published text; however, as I have explained elsewhere (Carregal-Romero 2017), the topic of sexual liberation and experimentation is more prominent in the drafts.² In one of the edited-out chapters, set in France, Katherine has sexual relationships with a stranger, with whom she engages in anal intercourse for the first time. Via email (March 14, 2018), I asked Tóibín about the suppressed episodes:

I was writing as a gay man about straight people. I was writing at a time when I was uneasy about my own sexuality, or at least about writing about it and speaking about it in public. That uneasiness made its way into the book, so that early drafts, or deleted sections, were taken out because they didn’t fit into the book, they seemed like part of another book. But why they were there in the first place is interesting. They were confused efforts on my part to start writing about my own sexuality, or sexual urges that I knew.

In the revisions, Tóibín’s gay subjectivity was not only displaced through the elision of several episodes, but also by means of changing Katherine’s behaviour. As observed (Carregal-Romero 2017, 381–2), whereas in the drafts there is a stronger sense of gay eroticism in scenes that resemble the subculture of cruising—when, for example, a lone Katherine finds Miguel at the bar and watches him intently, her gaze moving around his body—in the published version Katherine does not display this sexual agency, and just becomes the object of Miguel’s attentions and seduction. Tóibín’s

² These drafts are part of a special collection of the National Library of Ireland (Colm Tóibín Papers).

use of a female voice, as well as his decision to dilute the gay subtext of the story, may well reflect the socio-cultural situation of the time he wrote *The South*, given that gay sexuality remained largely coded and silenced in Irish writing before decriminalisation (Kilfeather 2002, 1040).

Though subterranean, the novel's gay subtext allegedly extends to the aura of social illegitimacy surrounding the main characters' relationship. In *The South*, as in his gay fictions, the author stresses the "validity of non-normative love" (Murphy 2009, 490), while also exposing the consequences of dysfunctional silences. When the unmarried Miguel and Katherine start living together in the Pyrenees, they become the object of town gossip and police surveillance. Because he is found to be an anarchist, Miguel is detained and tortured for days. A symmetry between political and sexual oppression may be imagined here. Under the Francoist law of *Vagos y Maleantes* (Vagrants and Thugs), homosexuality was silenced and codified as a "social danger" (Pérez-Sánchez 2007, 31); political dissidents and gays were similarly accused of moral deviancy, detained for days and, often, physically abused. After Miguel's detention in *The South*, the protagonists' life together becomes utterly destroyed, a situation that recalls Tóibín's description (cited above) of what happened to the criminalised gay couple living in the Enniscorthy of his youth, whose "lives were ruined" (Tóibín 2001, 265).

Silence also informs the narrative tone of *The South*. Tóibín, for instance, emphasises Miguel's psychological deterioration by constantly referring to his silences and refusal to listen: "He put his head on the round kitchen table. Again, he asked her not to talk" (133). Despite his characters' visible suffering, the writer controls emotion through a third-person voice where "Katherine sees things rather than feels them" and thus becomes "strangely distanced" (Foster 2015, viii). This "strange" distance, though, powerfully evokes their breakdown of communication, as well as Katherine's paralysis and denial regarding the distressing events she witnesses (Miguel eventually kills himself and their daughter in a mysterious car accident). Later, this previous distance vanishes in a first-person chapter, entitled "Miguel", where narrative tone loosens, and Katherine experiences a grief burst, frustrated as she is about the impossibility of closure in her relationship with her deceased lover: "This is what you have left me with: anguish, speculation, doubts. Over and over again. Help me. Miguel, listen to me" (170). It is at this moment that the full force of political violence and personal tragedy comes to the fore, through the character's direct confrontation with the gaps and silences of her past.

Three years after homosexual decriminalisation in Ireland, Tóibín published his first openly gay novel, *The Story of the Night* (1996), set in the Argentina of the mid-1970 and 1980s, during and after the period of the military regime, when political dissidents (*los desaparecidos*) were tortured, murdered and made to disappear (as a journalist, Tóibín witnessed the trials of the generals in the 1980s). As in *The South*, in this novel the author uses an outsider figure—Richard Garay, who is half-English and gay—to link sexual and political oppressions. *The Story of the Night* is a confessional, first-person narrative where silence emerges in the language of taboo, which fosters denial and wilful blindness. About *los desaparecidos*, Richard realises: “We saw nothing, not because there was nothing to see, but because we have trained ourselves not to see” (7). In his insightful review, American author Douglas Unger observes that, through the voice of the protagonist, the novel constructs a “state of hyperawareness by means of absence”, foregrounding Richard’s muteness about the crimes of the dictatorship, and how its “codes of taboo” affect him as a homosexual (1997). Yet, rather than being outside language, silence unavoidably functions “alongside the things said” (Foucault 1998, 27), permeating communication, as illustrated in the novel by the secret signs of cruising, or the hushed and halting conversations between gay lovers,³ “conspirators laden down with desire” (7).

This relationship between language and silence shapes people’s perceptions and worldview, and cannot be free from “issues of power” (Clair 1998, 21), which organise knowledge and channel personal and public responses and emotions towards certain subjects and social realities. In a scene of *The Story of the Night*, Richard takes a stranger home and, while having sex, they hear the mysterious sounds of car engines revving over and over: “They need power, he said, but I still did not understand. They need extra power for the cattle prods, he said. I still do not know if what he said was true” (8). Richard’s inability (or perhaps unwillingness) to grasp the implications of his lover’s veiled revelation vividly conveys

³ Additionally, as Aled Rees notes, Tóibín’s strategic use of Spanish also accentuates the silence of homosexuality in *The Story of the Night*: “Multilingualism during scenes of Richard’s sexual liaisons also functions as a form of silence. The verbal interactions between him and his partners are not always translated or glossed, and are often inadequately contextualized, a hindrance to understanding for a non-Spanish speaker reader” (2021, 143).

the aura of taboo and discretion that was required to sustain the generals' regime of terror. When the tortures become public knowledge, these crimes move outside the realm of the unspeakable, and Richard's disbelief gives way to his re-assessment of this past event: "It is only now years later that it seems significant, perhaps the only sign I was ever given of what was happening all around me" (8). As in *The South*, Tóibín deploys an aesthetics of silence to illuminate the personal and social effects of sexual and political oppressions; but, whereas in the first novel this is mainly achieved through variations in tone and narrative distance, in *The Story of the Night* silence manifests itself in the codes of taboo constructing the protagonist's psychology.

These two approaches to silence merge in Tóibín's immensely popular *The Blackwater Lightship* (1999), a gay AIDS novel set in the early 1990s Ireland. This is not the first time Tóibín deals with the devastating reality of AIDS, the difference being that, while in *The Story of the Night* Richard is eloquent about his feelings, in this novel the AIDS victim, Declan, is largely characterised by silence. In the last stages of his disease, Declan, who is in his twenties, relies on his gay friends, Paul and Larry, to break the terrible news of his health condition to his sister (Helen), mother (Lily) and grandmother (Dora), a situation that catalyses their reunification at their old country house in Cush, Co. Wexford. Because Paul and Larry had unselfishly taken care of the ailing Declan and now join his family to help them, *The Blackwater Lightship* can be regarded as a progressive gay narrative promoting notions of inclusivity and recognition. Paul and Larry recount their personal struggles too, and how they overcame homophobia; Declan, however, never articulates his own story. Narrated in third person, *The Blackwater Lightship* takes the perspective of the sister, Helen, now that the impending loss of her brother revives the memory of their father's early death and the repressed grief she suffered. Much can be said about Helen's confrontation with trauma, but this analysis shall concentrate on Declan's silence, and how it is produced via narrative distance (momentarily disrupted at times of emotional intensity and near revelation) and the character's codes of taboo, that is, his inability (rather than reluctance) to talk about his disease and past relationships.

As is typical of his fiction, Tóibín offers here a careful exploration of how social and familial environments determine individual psychology. *The Blackwater Lightship* recreates a time and place where, as Tóibín says, "the fact of being gay was not ever mentioned [within the family]"

(Ehrhardt 2013). Before the novel’s present time, Declan had already developed a sense of apartness and double life; early in the story, Helen admits that she knew very little about him, and that her brother “had replaced his family with his friends” (34). We also learn that, in his visits to the mother (Lily) and grandmother (Dora), Declan “never told [them] anything about himself” (142), hiding his homosexuality from both. If he remained silent about it, the story implies, it is because they were not willing to listen; even though Dora and Lily love and welcome the ailing Declan, they cannot bring themselves to utter the word “gay” or discuss the matter of his sexuality with him. Within the family, this silence about homosexuality—seen in “the discretion that is required between different speakers” (Foucault, 27)—works in both directions; as a result, Declan’s life as a gay person and AIDS victim becomes barely perceptible. The same absence is felt by the reader, as Tóibín frustrates narrative expectations of detail and disclosure concerning Declan’s unknown story.

With regard to style, Graham John Matthews (2019) explains that *The Blackwater Lightship* privileges “tone and mood over plot” (290), evoking “complex social and emotional relationships through association and symbolism” (291).⁴ In this story about illness and grief, much is transmitted through allusion, connotation and indirection. Pauses and gestures between words often build resonant silences in Tóibín’s writing, as the moment when Helen, after learning about her brother’s illness, visits him at hospital:

‘This is a real shock, Declan,’ she said.

He closed his eyes and did not reply. Paul put his finger to his lips, signalling to her to say nothing more. They stared at each other across the bed.

‘Hellie, I’m sorry about everything,’ Declan said, his eyes still closed.
(38)

Helen’s attempt to engage in conversation about his disease is met with silence, accompanied by gestures (not just her brother’s, but Paul’s) indicating the necessity to avoid such painful subject. Helen’s newly gained

⁴ References to coastal erosion (the family house is situated on a cliff-top) and Declan’s sick body, for instance, seem to be “metaphorically linked” (Walshe, 89). Another metaphor relates to the flashing light of Tuskar lighthouse, which sometimes illuminates the characters’ faces, suggesting new levels of self-awareness (the lightship of the title, though, was removed, which adds to the many other absences in the story).

knowledge and first encounter with Declan as a HIV-positive patient could have certainly created the conditions for emotional release, but this possibility of communication never materialises. It is against this background that silence acquires a strong expressive force, conveying Declan's difficult emotional state, affected as he is by a sense of shame on account of his AIDS.

Once his family learns about his HIV-status, Declan remains unable to abandon his acquired habit of reticence with regard to his personal life. As I have observed elsewhere (Carregal 2021, 93–99), most of these silences may be read as Tóibín's skilful dramatisation of his character's AIDS self-stigma. In a 2015 study on AIDS self-stigma in Ireland, Nadine Ferris France and others indicate that, despite today's visibility of an HIV/AIDS public discourse on sexual health, “a culture of silence emerged where HIV was never discussed” within the family, or on interpersonal levels (4). Because of these shameful silences, social stigma is not only internalised, but can also become “amplif[ied]” by the sufferer (France et al. 2015). HIV/AIDS discrimination was rampant and by no means hidden in the early 1990s, but, in his novel, Tóibín decides to remove any possible instances of contagion paranoia or moral reproach towards Declan,⁵ directing the reader's attention towards his character's self-stigma. Through Declan's distress, Tóibín seems to explore some of the negative emotions and behaviours involved in AIDS self-stigma, like self-blaming, isolation and anticipation of rejection.

As noted above, Declan's silence has a long history, but grows more poignant when he shows his incapacity to ask for family support. Dora, for instance, recalls the day she found him by surprise walking on the strand down her house:

I could see that he had been crying and he was so thin and strange, like as though he didn't want to see me (...) And he tried to make up for it when he came into the house. He was all smiles and jokes, but I'll never forget seeing him (...) I knew he was in trouble, but AIDS was the last thing I thought of, and I thought of everything. (143)

⁵ The story is idealistic in this respect, which leads Matthews to conclude that *The Blackwater Lightship* works as a “model of social progress”, rather than of social critique (292).

Just like Richard upon hearing the revving cars in *The Story of the Night* and not recognising them as instruments of torture, Dora is confused and unable to read the signs of her grandson’s suffering; AIDS was, for her, unthinkable, an effect of the disease being a taboo subject. From one of the friends (Larry), we learn that Declan had for long intended to disclose his disease to the family, as he “drove to Wexford a few times, to his mother’s house, but it was always late and he never went in” (143). A pattern emerges whereby Declan’s voice is rendered indirectly, which foregrounds his inarticulacy in the face of AIDS self-stigma (i.e. Paul is the one to inform Helen about her brother’s illness, and then she brings the news to Dora and Lily). In this family context, Larry and Paul are the only ones who can interpret their friend’s unverbaised needs. When Helen finds their mother “smothering” Declan with attentions in his room, she wonders whether he might be uncomfortable about it, but Paul tells her:

‘He was so afraid that your mother would refuse to see him or something,’ Paul said.

‘I think he desperately wanted her to know and help him and yet he couldn’t tell her, and now he has her there and she’s trying to help him.’

‘It might be better in small doses,’ Helen said drily.

‘It might also be exactly what he wants,’ Paul said. ‘He talked about it so much.’ (161)

Paul unveils here Declan’s long-hidden fears and expresses what his friend cannot confess, not even now in his mother’s loving company. The passage becomes an example of Tóibín’s tightly controlled release of information for dramatic effect, since this is the first time Helen (and by extension the reader, as the story is focalised through her) fully realises the anguish that was concealed in her brother’s silence and previous withdrawal from the family. Tóibín’s attention to the psychological dimensions of Declan’s silence serves to emphasise the consequences of his character’s AIDS self-stigma.

Declan does not die within the story, but his quick bodily deterioration constantly reminds us that there is little hope for him. The episodes describing his bursts of pain generate tensions between silence and emotional release, and have “an important place in the narrative development” (Severiche 2017, 124). In the final pages, Declan suffers a health crisis that has him awake all night, crying out loud and has to be taken back to hospital:

As Lily wiped his face and forehead and held his hands, and talked to him softly, he began to call out under his breath and, when the next attack came, Helen for the first time understood what he was saying.

He was saying: ‘Mammy, Mammy, help me, Mammy.’

(...)

Tears came into [Helen’s] eyes.

‘He’s been wanting to say that for a long time,’ Paul said, ‘or something like it. It’ll be a big relief for him.’ (259)

The scene interrupts the previous distancing of Declan, who now verbalises his long-desired return to the mother for the first time, as Paul reminds us. Because Declan breaks his silence, this brief but intense cry for help becomes a highly emotive moment of pain and relief. Yet, as the story closes, Tóibín still prevents us readers from having access to Declan’s interiority and refuses to fill in the gaps of what remains unknown about his character. Ultimately, through silence and the unknowable in *The Blackwater Lightship*, the writer not only explores individual psychology, but also the social implications of sexual stigma and hidden lives.

The Blackwater Lightship was followed in 2004 by another widely acclaimed novel, *The Master*, where Tóibín fictionalises Henry James’s life in the years between 1895 and 1899. As he also does in the previous novel in his characterisation of Declan, in *The Master* Tóibín “resists our will to know and understand” (Madden 2020, 138), and thus the aim is not to expose James’s secrets, but to dramatise his reticence, fear and insecurity concerning his homosexuality. To do so, Tóibín once again employs an aesthetics of silence, since, as he writes in *All a Novelist Needs* (2010), “I want [James’s] sexuality to be concealed, unspoken, with no private sexual moments shared with the reader – the reader must be like the wider world, kept at arm’s length” (29). In *The Master*, Tóibín turns to a technique that James, the novelist, had perfected: the “third person intimate”, which centres on the main character’s consciousness in a “slow and careful dramatization of an interior life, [and] silent registering of knowledge and experience” (Tóibín 2010a, 74). This creates a tone that effectively captures James’s emotional ambivalence and sense of the unfulfillable surrounding his sexuality.⁶ To achieve autonomy and focus on his

⁶ James’s sexual repression is by no means unjustified; the story includes, among other crucial episodes, his reaction of panic at Wilde’s trial and criminalised homosexuality. The Irish writer features as the living example of the public attention James sought to evade, in a Victorian context of compulsory heterosexuality and surveillance.

art, Tóibín's James often resorts to silence and subtle manipulation to keep a distance from the needs and demands of significant others, like family members and close female friends. This self-protective remoteness also leads him to renounce sexual and romantic relationships with some of the men he desires.

"Sexuality as secret life", Eibhear Walshe remarks, "is the key imaginative element in *The Master*" (107), and therefore, James's reticence and outward coldness contrast with his sexual emotions and warm memories of longing and desire for other men. This clash between James's public and private selves provides fertile ground for silence to flourish in the narrative. As an aesthetic practice, silence, too, can be used metaphorically to "slow time down", creating "empty spaces [that] sensitize us to a fullness which is otherwise totally invisible" (Bindeman 2017, 21). This sense of "fullness" in *The Master* usually emerges at moments of what Tóibín calls "sexual almostness" (Tóibín 2010a, 33), as in the scene where the elder James remembers his frustrated sexual encounter with Paul Joukowsky in their youth, when he stood in silence, wet with rain, on the pavement opposite his friend's hotel:

He wondered now if these hours were not the truest he had ever lived. The most accurate comparison he could find was with a smooth, hopeful, hushed sea journey, an interlude suspended between two countries, standing there as though floating, knowing that one step would be a step into the impossible, and the vast unknown. (10)

This aura of suspended time and silent expectation increases the intensity of that experience, giving prominence to James's paralysis, undecidability and eventual self-denial, mixed with the excitement of possibility. While writing, James muses on this memory, but censors himself when it comes to imagining the sexual possibilities of the encounter, as "it was something he would never allow himself to put into words" (10). The same memory reawakens twenty years later in the context of his infatuation with sculptor Henrik Andersen. In anticipation to Andersen's visit, James is overcome with a "strange glow of happiness" (297) and "tender longing" (299), but nonetheless reminds himself of "the impossibility of his imaginings" (298), that is, of a fully realised love life. Though strongly felt and profoundly inspiring, gay love and desire can only remain unspeakable and unattainable for Tóibín's James.

As indicated above, narrative style bears witness to the character's own restraint and sexual timidity, and therefore, silence colours the expression of the homoerotic. In one episode, Tóibín vividly describes the “silent, deadlocked game” (100) between James and ex-soldier Oliver Wendell Holmes as they share a bed. The closest suggestions of sexual intimacy occur when James feels “the bone of his pelvis hitting against Holmes” (98), just to ease himself “into [his] shape” some minutes later (100). We learn that something else beyond what is said might have happened, but Tóibín's James, as the guiding conscience of the novel, refuses explicit explanation of “the privacy that darkness brought” (100). In the course of their friendship, they make no declaration or insinuation about this shared experience, as to talk about it would mean to acknowledge its existence and importance. This habit of discretion explains James's firm self-control in his covert appreciations of the male body as an object of desire, like the time he listens to Andersen undressing, so concentrated as to hear the sound of silence: “As the floorboard creaked under Andersen's feet, Henry imagined his friend undressing, removing his jacket and his tie. And then he heard only silence as perhaps Andersen sat on the bed” (310). In its different varieties, silence emerges as one quintessential element of James's life (both his inner and social lives) as he navigates the constraints of Victorian society. As discussed, Tóibín's use of silence in *The Master* does not limit itself to the main character's voicelessness, but also accounts for a whole sensibility of secrecy, forbiddenness and self-denial surrounding homosexuality.

The immensely popular and critically appraised *The Master* became a turning point in Tóibín's literary career, and the author continued to develop a similar style in his subsequent works, like his short story collections *Mothers and Sons* (2006) and *The Empty Family* (2010b). About the first collection, Pico Iyer notes that “Toibín's real interest is in the constant, silent dialogue of watcher and watched” and “how drama plays out inside the mind” (2006), while Keith Miller, in his review of *The Empty Family*, opines that the “stories are steeped in a Jamesian sense of equivocation, of characters on thresholds” (2010). Many of the stories in both collections revolve round things unsaid, unresolved emotional conflicts, and the ways in which mothers and (in most cases, gay) sons try to evade one another's influence (the strained bond between mothers and their children is a recurrent trope in his fiction). Tóibín

frequently employs Jamesian topics of secrecy and subterfuge, with characters that, fearing rejection, retreat into silence for self-protection and personal independence, which at times provokes a kind of internal exile.

Included in *The Empty Family*, “One Minus One” is addressed to a second-person narratee, an imaginary conversation with an ex-boyfriend about the time the unnamed narrator travelled from the United States to Ireland to his mother deathbed. Told in the present tense, the story constantly refers to the gap between narrator and narratee, and the exact reasons for their separation are left unexplained. Silence is the backbone of a story focusing on palpable absences, where “narrative form is a poignant reminder of the impossibility of direct interaction” (Conan 2014, 48). There is both proximity and distance in this intimate confession, which denies itself the possibility of ever being spoken, of reaching its addressee:

I promise you that I will not call. I have called you enough and woken you enough times, in the years when we were together and in the years since then. But there are nights now in this strange, flat and forsaken place when those sad echoes and dim feelings come to me slightly more intense than before. They are like whispers, or trapped whispering sounds. And I wish I had you here, and I wish that I had not called you those other times when I did not need to as much as I do now. (7)

These “whispers” and “sad echoes” evoke a whole world of unspoken emotional truths between the narrator and his lost mother, which somehow damaged his relationship with the ex-boyfriend. The story dwells on the mother-son bond in the face of loss, trauma⁷ and the taboo of homosexuality, and, as in *The Blackwater Lightship*, familial homophobia is not present through images of outright rejection, but in acts of silence and withdrawal. Through indirection (a secondary character recognises the narrator’s partner at the funeral), we learn that the mother knew about her son’s homosexuality, but this subject remained unspoken between them. The narrator now laments “how little she knew about [him]” (9), though he adds that the mother had “never wanted [him] very much” and that, in their family reunions, “[he] was protected from

⁷ This trauma originates from his father’s terminal illness and the long period that the parents spent away from home, when the protagonist and his brother, as children, were left by their mother at their aunt’s house. Almost identical episodes feature in *Nora Webster* and *The Blackwater Lightship*.

what might have been said, or not said” (12). As I have argued elsewhere (Carregal-Romero 2018, 402–5), in Tóibín’s story home is not a source of comfort and unproblematic belonging, and the narrator’s subjectivity as a gay person cannot be understood outside his past of self-suppression and alienation within the family. By addressing the silences around the maternal relation, Tóibín’s story foregrounds the corrosive effects of familial homophobia.

A final topic for consideration is Tóibín’s literary approach to the Church scandals when, from the 1990s onwards, the reporting of clerical abuse of minors became widespread, causing much indignation in Ireland. Historians like Diarmaid Ferriter insist that, before the scandals, there was subterranean knowledge about child abuse, which had been happening within families, communities and the Church (2009, 330). Conspiracies of silence, like the one maintaining the impunity of child abuse, involve “silent witnessing” and “interpersonal dynamics of keeping [uncomfortable truths] from entering public discourse” (Zerubavel 2010, 32). The breaking of conspiracies of silence cannot be free from previous cultural restrictions and taboos, though. In this respect, there is a vital distinction between the dismantling of social architectures of silence (by assessing people’s wilful blindness, the silencing of victims and so on), and “whistle-blowing”, which circumvents the issue of society’s “collaborative silence”, focusing on the blaming of specific institutions or individuals (Zerubavel, 36). As shall be argued, Tóibín’s “A Priest in the Family” (*Mothers and Sons*) and “The Pearl Fishers” (*The Empty Family*) explore the tensions and contradictions of whistle-blowing in the context of the sexual scandals.

“A Priest in the Family” develops in small-town Ireland and features an elderly mother’s confrontation with the shocking news that her son, a school priest, pleaded guilty to sexual abuse of teenage boys. Visited by Father Greenwood, who struggles to communicate the message, Molly now discovers the reasons for people’s strange behaviour, and the hushed voices and whispers around her. Far from feeling comforted by her neighbours’ tactful silence, Molly is convinced that her son’s disgrace has engulfed her too. Talking to a friend, Molly implores:

‘Would you ask people to talk to me about it, I mean people who know me? I mean, not to be afraid to mention it.’

‘I will, Molly, I’ll do that.’

As they parted, Molly noticed that Nancy was close to tears. (167)

Fear and apprehension, rather than community support towards Molly, characterise townspeople's reactions, attitudes that somehow respond to the media's vociferous denunciations of these crimes, with daily images of "priests with their anoraks over their heads" (160). In this story, the Irish media's whistle-blowing does not favour a new language of openness concerning abuse and does not certainly contribute to any reflections about communal dysfunctions. Molly's daughters' greatest worry is that Frank will be publicly named when condemned, and Molly herself is advised to hide and go on holidays to the Canaries, since "there might be a lot of detail in the papers" (169). Here, Tóibín suggests that, even though there has been recognition of these crimes, the same culture of shame that had initially concealed abuse remained part of the public sensibilities arising from the Church scandals period.

In "The Pearl Fishers", Tóibín continues with his explorations of the social impact of the Church scandals. The story brings together the unnamed narrator—an internationally renowned writer—and two old friends from school, Donnacha and Gráinne, a religious married couple and representatives of a renewed Catholic Church that will "stand for truth" (78). To demonstrate her commitment to truth, Gráinne announces, as the three-share dinner, the upcoming publication of a memoir revealing her sexual abuse by Father Moorehouse (a "fallen" priest), when she was sixteen. In her book, Gráinne characterises the narrator as vulnerable to the priest's power and uses his name and distorts his experiences to portray him as a witness to her suffering. Dismayed by Gráinne's lies, the narrator retorts: "Speak for yourself" (79). If sexual abuse was hardly speakable in "A Priest in the Family", here, in Gráinne's company, "there was never exactly silence, even when nothing was being said" (76), and the narrator suspects that her whistle-blowing is nothing but self-serving, a strategy to raise her profile as a best-selling journalist. Tóibín's fallible narrator does acknowledge that, due to the silencing of abuse in the recent past, sex between priests and students (male and female) was "unimaginable", and that he might have easily confused "the grunts and yelps" of their illicit sex for "a sound coming from the television" (70). Despite this recognition, he still believes that, if Gráinne's relationships with Father Moorehouse existed, they were consensual. Ironically for the reader, there is no way to verify the narrator's unspoken suspicions, an ambiguity that reinforces the role of silence and the unknowable in the story.

“The Pearl Fishers” is not only permeated by the narrator’s own biases (he mocks Gráinne’s militant Catholicism and dislikes her for her political views), but also by what he and the other characters refuse to say or acknowledge. The passionate relationship between the narrator and Donnacha during their adolescence, for example, remains silenced. As the dinner progresses, the narrator’s sexually explicit memories of their years together provide a stark contrast with Donnacha’s seemingly indifferent attitude towards him, as he offers “not even the smallest hint of recognition” (88). The narrator believes that “[Donnacha] remained part of the culture that produced him” (76), that is, a culture of sexual hypocrisy, yet he complies with his demands for secrecy and denial of their past emotional attachments. He feels uncomfortable when Gráinne recalls the evening the three of them, as students, attended “The Pearl Fishers” opera rehearsal, an occasion which, as she writes in her memoir, marked the beginning of her romantic life with Donnacha (the narrator’s memories contradict Gráinne’s version, as this was also the time Donnacha and the narrator were lovers). The extent of Gráinne’s (self)-deception is unknown to the reader, but what remains clear is that the gay story is, once again, “overwritten by the married couple’s official narrative of heterosexual fulfilment” (Carregal-Romero 2015, 80). Tóibín’s text thus suggests that, when it comes to norms of sexual respectability, the legitimate couple is often entitled to “safeguar[d] the truth, and reserv[e] the right to speak while retaining the principle of secrecy” (Foucault, 1). Against the background of a more liberal Ireland that has started to speak forcefully about clerical abuse, “The Pearl Fishers” nonetheless insists on the gaps, silences and ambiguities concerning the sexual lives of its main characters.

With its focus on silence, this chapter has traced continuities in Tóibín’s depictions of his characters’ hidden lives, from the gay subtext in *The South* to the silenced gay relationship in “The Pearl Fishers”. As explained, silence emerges as an aesthetic practice and key narrative element in Tóibín’s work, produced by variations in tone and distance, gestures and indirection, the language of taboo, controlled release of information, the tensions between revelation and concealment, and the skilful dramatisation of (self)-denial, absences and grief. In an interview, Tóibín has related that his characters usually “live in their silences”, not to confront “the level of emotion under the surface of their mild, placid lives” (Yabroff 2014). Tóibín’s prose is often precise and reticent, but rich in implication, and silence, in its diverse configurations, allows readers to perceive the real

feelings beneath the characters’ outwardly distant and cold behaviour, as is notably the case in his rendition of Henry James in *The Master*. As has also been observed, silence is not just personal, but can also become a social practice reinforced at the level of the community, with its shared codes of taboo impeding communal acknowledgement of realities like political violence and repression, something which Tóibín’s third novel, *The Story of the Night*, vividly illustrates. The process of breaking one’s walls of silence is, in Tóibín’s texts, always affected by previous restrictions and becomes fraught with contradiction and ambivalence, originating from the secrets of the past. This sense of the unknowable, for instance, adds much complexity and dramatic force in Tóibín’s rendition of Declan, an AIDS victim, in *The Blackwater Lightship*. The present chapter has, therefore, identified and assessed a discourse of silence running through Tóibín’s oeuvre, which masterfully constructs his characters’ psychology as they navigate personal and social pressures, and attempt to come to terms with their emotional truths.

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