

## ‘Belonging without Belonging’: Colm Tóibín’s Dialogue with the Past

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**Abstract:** Tóibín is not the archetypal ‘revisionist’ intellectual that some have made him into, but rather a sort of in-between, making a virtue of his own ambivalences towards notions of tradition, community and nationhood. In this essay some of these ambivalences are scrutinised with special reference to two essays from Tóibín’s *Walking along the Border (or Bad Blood)*. The assumption is that, intellectually, Tóibín’s ambivalences are rooted in a humanism which may partly be ascribed to his personal attachments, affections and loyalties: to family, place and community. It is argued that his personal need to reconcile himself with the loss of his father, when he was a young boy, is connected with a theme of more general significance: how to come to terms with the loss of the “certainties” of the past —nation, family, church— while defining and asserting personal autonomy in a new order of things, bereft of paternal authorities.

**Key Words:** exile, belonging, church, nationalism, post-nationalism, revisionism, humanism, identity, community, past and present.

Colm Tóibín once characterised himself as coming from the ‘climate of hope’ created by the reforms after 1959: an Ireland of “free education, returned emigrants, television, reduced censorship” (Tóibín 1994: 54). In the 1980s, however, the economy went into recession, and with public debts, rising unemployment and emigration figures, and the reassertion of socially conservative values, Tóibín and his likeminded of the 1950s generation began to fear that the age of reform had seen closure.

To young liberal intellectuals like Tóibín, it made little difference at the time whether it was Fianna Fáil’s Charles Haughey or Fine Gael’s Garret FitzGerald who was at the political helm. To them, it was a decade of fading dreams and growing disillusionment, and their frustration was the greater for seeing how the personification of the reforming spirit, Garret FitzGerald, withdrew his own ambitious programme of reform, ending his

political career as the most ineffective of Irish political leaders, a man “full of a bloated rhetoric of goodwill”, but who, in the final analysis, had “contributed nothing to Irish society”, as Tóibín would later appraise his ill-fated political career (Tóibín 1990: 148).

The referendum on the amendment to the Constitution in 1983, which inscribed the ban against abortion in the Constitution of Ireland, was a particularly depressing event. It showed that the Catholic Church was still capable of wielding considerable power over the electorate. In an interview I did with Tóibín in 1994, he remembered the public debate prior to the referendum as “depressing, disappointing and revolting” (Böss 1994). He referred to his personal involvement as a journalist for *The Irish Independent* and talked about his frustrations upon realising that the anti-amendment side had been beaten by people that he had initially believed to be a minority, but who now turned out to be a

majority of the electorate. These thoughts took him to reflect on the traditionalist forces in Ireland and his own estrangement from their discourse on the Irish nation:

When I hear people speaking about ‘Catholic Ireland’ and saying that we as a people belong on this island because history has given us a special role to play, it seems to me that they are trying to put shutters on all the windows, which we have just managed to open, to the outside world. As far as I am concerned, my nation is this house; this space here and the upstairs. I don’t really have any other Ireland.

In the same interview, Tóibín admitted that, in the mid-1980s, he had felt that ‘the only sensible thing to do ‘was to follow Joyce’s example by going into exile. To him, this meant returning to Barcelona and Catalonia, which he described as “a great post-Christian society” and his own personal “bolt hole”. In 1994, however, there was no longer any point in becoming a physical exile. Ireland had become much more tolerant and tolerable. “Unfortunately”, he added with a wry smile, since

as a writer, I’m not sure that this is all to the good. In a way, it would have been wonderful to have priests banging down your door. But they don’t do that anymore. It’s so difficult to be a rebel these days. [...] Living in Ireland today is sometimes like watching the Enlightenment in France in the 18<sup>th</sup> century happening here. It does have its moments of pure comedy, if nothing else, but also quite a lot else. Right now I would much prefer to live in Ireland than in England, if only for the feeling of belonging to a place where one doesn’t belong.

With this ironic twisting of perennial “Irish” themes of exile and alienation, Tóibín comes out today, not as the archetypal “revisionist” intellectual, as some critics have portrayed him (cf. Ryan 2002), but rather as a sort of in-between, making a virtue of his own ambivalences towards notions of tradition, community and nationhood. Striving to place himself beyond the old conflicts over identities, he even questions the identity of himself: ‘I don’t think I have an identity,’ he told me on an informal occasion in 2002. A remark which reflects one of the key themes of Tóibín’s novel *The Story of the Night* (1996): the dream of being able to get rid of the burden of inherited identities.

In this essay I intend to subject such ambivalences, which characterise both Tóibín’s journalism and novels, to closer scrutiny. My assumption is that, intellectually, they are rooted in a humanism which may partly be ascribed to his personal attachments, affections and loyalties: to family, place and community.

Tóibín’s humanism may be illustrated by two examples: In the aforementioned interview, responding to my question why he, as an atheist and a liberal intellectual, had not simply decided to reject religion and church, he answered:

Well, you see, one gets used to people. Many priests and many Catholic people in Ireland may still not be liberal, but they are also my neighbours, also my family. One gets fond of people, personally.

Tóibín’s observation here reflects how feelings of social connectedness and personal affection temper his critique of tradition and its representatives. One may call his stance an ‘empathetic critique of tradition’ based on the conviction that tradition may serve to create a valuable sense of community and belonging among people.

Similarly, one may point to his motivation for wanting his readers to feel a degree of understanding of the moral conundrums of Justice Eamon Redmond in *The Heather Blazing* (1993) —in spite of his inclination to reject his actions and decisions as a public figure. Tóibín meant the novel to be a portrait of the mentality of Fianna Fáil. (Böss 1994). Long into the 1980s, Fianna Fáil represented a version of nationalism of which Tóibín himself could be scathingly ironical as a journalist. But it was also a party whose story had been closely entangled with the story of his own family. Hence, the writing of the novel was a very personal project, he admitted when I interviewed him in 1994: “This meant facing, no confronting the past”, he said. But confronting it differently from the way it had normally been done by Irish writers:

I wanted in a way to go back. No one that I am aware of has ever described the new Catholic middle class in Ireland that arose after independence and got money without laughing at it. [...] But I wanted to have a look at them, a look at their soul and all that. See what it was like. [...] I have seen that some readers have hated him [the judge]. John Banville said to me that he was a

weasel. But I don't think he is a weasel. I think one must sometimes, in that book, feel that one is him so that one may understand what happens to him as he is moving from being a little boy to becoming a dry old man.

Thus, although fundamentally critical of the culture of traditional Catholic nationalism and its vision of Irish society as a moral community, Tóibín is not merely concerned with diagnosing the “pathology of the post-independence Southern State”, as Tom Herron has claimed (2000: 170). Instead, one should see him as a writer who is constantly crossing the border between his own personal space and the ‘nation’ he has left behind. In this process, he always remains in-between these spaces, as an outsider. Yet he is able to sustain a profound respect and even ‘fondness’ for and identification with the people and the community he hails from.

This attitude may be seen as unconsciously motivated by his wish to reconnect symbolically with the father he lost as a young boy. Especially books like *The Heather Blazing* and *The Sign of the Cross* (1994) reflect the need for filial bonding with a paternity which, he knows, can never be restored. To reconcile himself with loss.

In this essay, however, I will argue that this personal motif is connected with a theme of more general significance: how to come to terms with the loss of the ‘certainties’ of the past—nation, family, church—while defining and asserting a space for oneself, personal autonomy, in a new order of things, bereft of paternal authorities. Stripped of ‘identity’. This argument deserves more thoroughgoing and extensive treatment than I can give it here. With the limited space at my disposal, however, I hope to be able to draw its outlines on the basis of two essays that I find particularly pertinent. The essays first appeared in 1987 in *Walking along the Border* (or *Bad Blood*, as it was re-titled in 1998).

*Walking along the Border* reflects the kind of critical journalism that Tóibín had been writing since he went back to Dublin in 1978, after a few years in Barcelona.

Tóibín began his writing career as a freelancer for the *Sunday Independent* and the new, glossy magazines that had become the voice of young, urban, anti-establishment Ireland. The 1980s was a period of journalistic muckraking in which “truth was often stronger

than fiction” and there were “complexities and contradictions behind what the papers said [that] cried out to be explored”, as Tóibín later put it (1990: 197). In those days, the journalist, editor and essayist assumed the role as moderator of an anti-nationalist, liberal discourse which had hardly seen its like since the days of *The Bell*. Hitherto monolithic institutions such as Fianna Fáil, the GAA and the Catholic Church no longer seemed to be able, as Tóibín saw it, to “offer fixity or fusion’ in a society where the centre of gravity had been dissolved and where there was “no sense of continuity, tradition, legacy, except one that [was] jagged and broken.” (Tóibín 1987b: 8)

In the second half of the 1980s, especially after his period as editor of *Magill*, Tóibín had acquired a reputation as one of the brightest and sharpest pens in Ireland’s new critical journalism, and his reputation was confirmed by the publication of *Walking along the Border*. But it had a subjective dimension hitherto unseen.

This book is a personal journey into the mental geography of Ireland, North and South, in order to understand the reasons for its ailments. A couple of the chapters, however, are more than that: “Dark Night of the Soul”, which is an account of the writer’s ‘pilgrimage’ to Station Island, and its sequel, in which he describes a visit to White Island.

Tóibín’s account of his visit to St. Patrick’s Purgatory is not only a journey into Irish Catholicism and the religious landscape of Ireland, but also a story about the testing of his own relationship with the past. Like so many other of his essays, it is an existential exploration of his relation to personal roots: here, the lost world of faith and ritual.

The writer returns to the world of traditional Irish Catholicism; a world governed by a priesthood who was able to hold its flock in a tight leash through sermons of moral exhortation, the institution of the private confessional and the mastery of self-mortifying rituals meant to prepare the individual’s soul for salvation. However, due to the writer’s own alienation from this priesthood and the doctrines of the church, the journey back soon turns into a failed—or an inverted pilgrimage.

When the writer sets out on his journey, he already thinks he knows what to expect. He is even self-conscious about the ‘literary’

character of his journey to an island which has a unique place in Irish literary history:

I already knew of the pilgrimage there, from stories people had told me. There is a short story by Sean O'Faolain called "Lovers of the Lake". There are poems by Patrick Kavanagh and Seamus Heaney about the island as a central repository of the faith of our fathers, Irish Catholicism, where people with simple faith came hoping for a cure or a favour or a strengthening of their belief. (37)

In spite of an initial appearance of objectivity and personal detachment on the part of the writer, the reader soon understands that he is, in reality, a participant observer. It is not that the writer constantly draws attention to himself. On the contrary, he is rather faithful to his role as an observer and only occasionally is the reader admitted into his own personal universe. However, the few glimpses that he gets are enough to make the reader discern a tension in the gaze cast upon the world of religious belief and practice.

Given his apostasy, the writer initially relates how he had felt slightly uneasy about going to Ireland's most famous pilgrimage site. He had been worried about being disclosed as "an interloper, a fellow who had not come to pray for special intention, a person whose dialogue with the Almighty had become somewhat one-sided", as he writes (1987a: 37). To these worries are added more mundane concerns pertaining to the physical hardship that the pilgrimage would imply: hunger and lack of sleep.

These worries are confirmed from the moment the "boatman" steers his boat across Lough Derg and they arrive among people seeming "to inhabit a different world", looking "cold", "pale", "depressed", and "distressed" (38).

When a few more pilgrims came the ropes were untied and the boatman steered across Lough Derg to St Patrick's Purgatory on Station Island.

The first people we saw seemed to inhabit a different world. They looked cold. Their faces were pale, and as they watched us coming towards them, they blinked. They had been starving for two days and they had had no sleep the previous night. They looked exhausted and depressed. Their feet were bare. 'If you knew what was coming you would go back now,' one of them, a woman with a

Northern accent, said to a few of us. She laughed. I knew she would get no sleep until ten o'clock that night. I had been reading the timetable. As I walked towards the church, I noticed people huddled up against each other; their expressions seemed even more distressed than those who sat near the water. (38)

Thus, instead of being a two-day visit to Purgatory, it appears as a descent into hell.

As is normal for mythical journeys, also this one takes the hero through a series of physical and mental trials. He decides to follow the timetable printed in the leaflet he picked up on buying admission to the island. This means doing the stations like everybody else. At the same time, however, he never forgets to register his own feelings about it. From the outset, then, the account shifts between observations of the pilgrims and reflections on his observations and his own experience of performing rituals, saying prayers and listening to sermons:

'Go to St Brigid's Cross, on the outside wall of the Basilica'; the leaflet now directed. 'Kneel and say three Our Fathers, three Hail Marys and one Creed. Stand with your back to the cross, and, with arms outstretched, renounce three times the World, the Flesh and the Devil.'

I kissed the Cross and continued to the next station and knelt down. Silently, the prayers were said again, and then each of my companions rose to their feet and stood with their backs to the wall, stared straight ahead and stretched out both arms saying quietly: 'I renounce the World [sic] the Flesh and the Devil'. Each of them did this three times, without the slightest trace of embarrassment, and I followed suit, saying the words as well. (38)

After having been instructed to walk around the Basilica four times, the writer sees a group of pilgrims sitting around the back wall of the church. He observes how "[t]here was a strange lifelessness about them; they seemed not to take much interest in what was happening around them" (38). For his own part, however, he adopts a zen-like approach in that he deliberately refrains from taking any interest in the substance of prayer, trying instead "to empty my mind, not to dwell on anything in particular, to keep my concentration fixed on nothing, to enjoy being here among complete strangers" (38-39).

However, he soon begins to find the elaborate, repetitive ritual of kneeling, rising, praying and walking around meaningless and boring, and he plays with the idea of defecting to “real world”, in which the needs of the flesh are not denied (46):

I walked down as far as the pier and wondered if I shouldn't just get my bag and go. I could make the border town of Pettigoe before dark, maybe even get on a bit further, have a meal, a few drinks, a long night's sleep. I had seen the island. I knew what it was like. (41)

Nevertheless, he stays on, but only to be alienated by a priest sermonising against an alleged “moral drought” which threatens to cause a “decline of religious practice” and which erodes people's awareness of “the importance of family life, and the sanctity of marriage” (43). With the prospect of having to confess his own sins, something he has not done since he was fifteen, he is once more tempted to cut off his journey and leave the island. It strikes him “like a thunderbolt” that nothing stops him from saying no, walking off and leaving (44). Paradoxically, however, this very awareness of his personal autonomy — his freedom from the spell of the island and the coercion of the church— seems to be what finally makes him decide to stay and endure the remainder of his time there.

A mitigating circumstance is the human *rapport* which he develops with his fellow pilgrims. Although many are deeply absorbed in prayer and ritual, some, he discovers, seem to have equally ambiguous and individual motives for having gone to the island as he himself had. Even ‘normal’ pilgrims do not spend their time in constant prayer. Some have brought things along to read: one carries Seamus Heaney's *Station Island*, another former Chrysler president Lee Iacocca's autobiography. And then there is the licence to talk:

In between Stations there was a break and we all crowded into a room which jutted right on to the lake, but otherwise resembled a waiting room in a train station. Everybody talked. How was it going? They wanted to know. The next few hours are the worst, everyone said. If you can get through the next few hours, you'll be all right. Everyone was gentle when they spoke; there seemed to be a kindness building up between us. (43)

The sense of emotional ambiguity towards what he experiences is most cogently expressed in a passage in which he relates what he feels after having been instructed to go down to the lake shore:

‘Go to the water's edge; stand’, said the leaflet. ‘Say five Our Fathers, five Hail Marys and one Creed. Kneel and repeat these prayers.’

I became interested again as I stood there with my hands joined and my back to the pilgrims who were moving among the beds, kneeling, standing up, moving around again like ants in an anthill. Here I stood and looked across the lake, the small waves of lake water furrowing up against the stones. I was hungry, I was tired, I was bored. But there was something wonderful in the poetry of this, hundreds of people moving on a small piece of ground, quietly praying and coming to the edge of the water to stare towards the shore and pray. (41)

Apart from discovering —and appreciating— the aesthetic and bonding powers of collective ritualism, the writer learns that behind what may, from the outside, look like an anthill of people moving and believing in unquestioning unison is, in fact, seen from the inside, a much more complex picture. The group consists of individuals who possess a sense of humour and personal freedom and who follow their own personal conscience in spite of the hectoring of their priests. Waiting for the boat to take them back from the island, the writer happens to be standing next to a middle-aged woman from Derry. They talk about the forthcoming referendum to remove the constitutional ban against divorce, and the woman agrees with him “that it would be wonderful if it were passed, despite the sermon we had listened to on the subject” (45). Thus, *Station Ireland*, at the end of the writer's journey, may appear more as a symbol of a changing Ireland than the Ireland of the past.

However, it is only upon leaving the island that the pilgrims change into a lighter mood. Even the “sermoniser” himself, the Prior of Lough Derg, Monsignor Gerard McSorley, now appears “a changed man [...] in great form, laughing and joking”. The writer agrees to accept the offer of a lift from a priest and his sister, a nun. Both of them tell him that they thought the pilgrimage had done them good, and the writer answers that “I thought it

had done me good as well” (46). Evidently, further conversation on the subject would have revealed that they diverged on the meaning of “good”.

Surely, to the writer himself, returning to “the real world, in front of the Railway Hotel in Enniskillen”, the “goodness” of the pilgrimage is derived from what it taught him about himself and his fellow Irishmen and women. For his own part, he learnt that the old world order of Ireland no longer had any claim on him. He is no longer haunted by ‘guilt’ and is therefore able to celebrate having passed his personal trial. Nevertheless, he still decides to adhere to the rules of pilgrimage:

It was a Sunday morning, almost midday. I brought the newspapers and sat myself down in the Railway Hotel with a pint of Lucozade, soft drinks being permitted on the last day of the pilgrimage, but nothing else until midnight except black tea and dry toast. The Lough Derg spell was broken, however, and the age-old system of self-mortification meant nothing now. I didn’t feel even slightly guilty as I sat among the Sunday drinkers and ordered chicken sandwiches. I devoured them when they came and when I had finished them I ordered more. After a while, I asked for the lunch menu and got through an enormous lunch in the dining room: soup, roast beef, mashed potatoes, chips, carrots, cauliflower, fresh fruit salad and coffee. The pilgrimage was over. (46)

The author realises that the Lough Derg spell that had hovered over his own childhood has been broken.

Five days later, the next Friday morning, the results of the divorce referendum are publicised: it turns out that the country has overwhelmingly voted no after a massive scare campaign instrumented by the Church.

On the same day, the writer and some of his friends pay a visit to another island, White Island in Lough Erne. This visit, described in the following essay which is thematically connected to the previous one by being a kind of alternative journey, offers the writer—and reader—a vision of a different order of things.

The visitors arrive on the island on a day when “[a] white heat had descended on the lake”, and, setting off from Enniskillen across a “deserted” lake into a calm, misty light that “shrouded” and “filtered” everything in the distance (48). The metaphors employed help us to understand that, once again, this boat trip

is more than a literal crossing. Not only because the company keeps crossing back and forth across the border between North and South, running invisibly through the waters of Lake Erne, but also because the writer’s encounter with the Ireland of the early Middle Ages—represented by the island’s famous rock sculptures—confirms him in his growing awareness of a religious heritage, with which he is better able to identify with than the one he revisited in Lough Derg.

To the visitors, the Hiberno-Roman church ruin itself has little interest. It is the series of eight human figures cemented on to a stone wall that draws their attention. They represent to them a picture of the life-denying, patriarchal cultural environment of Ireland, North and South. However, one of the figures, a woman, stands out among them:

Seven of the faces were still plain, most of them wore a somewhat disgruntled expression. One of them, the last in the series, which was just a stone head stuck into the wall, looked positively unhappy. The two largest figures carried with them something of the pomp of the church, their bells and croziers carved into the stone with great clarity. They had been found among the stones on the island; here they seemed oddly sanitized in the way they had been preserved; they seemed to be joining the rest of the population, North and South, in saying ‘No’. Their mouths on the word for eternity. ‘No. No. No’. ‘Ulster says No’. The Republic says No.’ The first figure, however, looked as though she could survive in any environment. She would stand out in any company. Her hands, it should be said, were not by her side. They were down between her legs, displaying her pudenda. She had a fixed grin on her face, which seemed to express the joys of lust, she was egging you on, her face full of temptation, her cheeks bulging: she had no shame. ‘Yes’, she was saying, ‘yes, yes, yes’. (48)

The síle-na-gig of White Island is not unique. Similar figures can be found in other places in both Ireland and England. However, here, surrounded by “seven clerics and malcontents”, she gains a special significance. She represents “freedom, fun and sexual frolics as well as fertility and the lure of lust was more emphatic” (48). The visitors therefore have

a great time looking at her, discussing her, putting words in her mouth as well as taunting the poor clerics stuck in their stone, unable to answer back.

On the boat again, we doubled back towards Belleek, half of which was in the South, strengthened by our encounter with early Christian Ireland. (48)

Once again, the writer celebrates his new insight. He proposes ironic toasts to the “‘Plain people of Ireland’ for their wisdom in deciding that we, in the Republic, would have no divorce”; to the “Catholic bishops of Ireland, who had encouraged the people to vote no” and also “to the various politicians for making their views so well known”. Eventually—as the clear, blue sky, which had turned the island into a place of revelation of alternative sanctities, again gives way to the white haze of the mainland—they give their final toast to the síle-na-gig of White Island, the pagan counterpart of the Holy Mother. (48-49)

On 10 April 1966, President de Valera issued a message to the media on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the Easter Rising. In the message, the President commemorated the uprising by honouring the seven leaders. He explained the significance of their action for the future of the Irish nation. Their decision “to assert, once more, in arms our nation’s right to sovereign independence” had been “one the boldest and most far-reaching in our history” (Moynihan: 605). Their characters represented, not only all the highest ideals of the Irish people, but prophetic, qualities: They had awakened the people’s soul and in this way set a chain of events in motion that had given Ireland its freedom and led it to its present stage of social development.

Eamon de Valera’s presidential message was broadcast by all communication media, including RTE, the state sponsored broadcasting corporation, which, during the preceding week, had spellbound its audience with a drama documentary on the Rising. Colm Tóibín, a boy of eleven at the time, later remembered the effect of the serialised and dramatised narrative on his own parents:

Every night during Easter Week 1966 our family watched the drama-documentary about Easter 1916 on state television. A friend of the family who had been in the Rising and had known the leaders came to watch it with us. The executions were drawn out, each moment dramatised—the grieving

family, the grim prison, the lone leader in his cell, writing his last poem or letter. Sometimes the emotion in our house was unbearable, and when it came to James Connolly’s turn to be executed my mother ran out from the house crying. We had never seen her cry before. (1993: 3)

In this essay, “New Ways of Killing Your Father”, written 27 years later, Tóibín wonders how quickly Ireland moved from “a time when the state had sponsored such emotions to a time when the songs we learned at school were banned on the state radio”, and he concludes, quoting one of his contemporaries, the poet Michael O’Loughlin, that the dramatic revision of official attitudes to 1916 was not only a result of the state’s wish to distance itself from resurgent militant republicanism in the North after 1970, but also reflected the cynical opportunism of the Southern political leaders whose “political lies were finally catching up with it” (5)—another sort of spell broken.

In the essay he remembers how there were many of his own generation who waited for the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Rising “with considerable interest”, although “most people in Ireland remained reasonably indifferent” (5). As for himself, he had not found “things” very “simple” that year. Like many other writers, he had received an invitation from an organisation which was planning a state sponsored marathon reading by Irish writers at the General Post Office in Dublin. He first considered reading Beckett’s “First Love”, in which Beckett mocks an alleged Irish obsession with “history’s ancient faeces”. But then he decided against it: “I did not want any work of mine (or any work of anybody else’s) being used by the state to replace its own halfheartedness about the past and insecurity about the present”. (6)

Instead he decided to spend Easter in Spain. But after he had bought his tickets, he ran into a local politician from Wexford. The man, whom he “liked” and who could tell him that he was planning commemorations of a totally different nature, asked him to take part in a march through his native town of Enniscorthy on Easter Sunday together with other descendants of the men who had staged a local rising in 1916. As the grandson of a man who had been among the local rebels, Tóibín found this idea much “closer to home” and made

revisionism look like an abstraction. It spoke to his instinctual and familial sympathies:

[T]here would be no quoting Beckett in Enniscorthy. No one at any of the meetings to plan the march, I was assured, had expressed the slightest doubt about the Rising; no one knew anything about revisionism; it had filtered from the universities to the middle classes in the cities, but not beyond. People in Enniscorthy were simply proud that the town and their forebears had been involved in the Rising. I would have loved to have marched with them. (ibid.)

Still, it was too late for him to cancel his plans and, wandering around Seville that Easter, he wished that “things were simpler, wishing that [he] was not in two minds about everything” (ibid).

However, as I hope to have demonstrated in this essay, ambivalence and an acute awareness of the nuances of reality, past and present, are precisely what always characterises the humanism of Colm Tóibín and his attempt to recover his paternal roots without getting spellbound by the certainties of the past.

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