Colm Tóibín

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Colm Tóibín. *The Master*. London: Picador, 2004, 470pp., £ 16.99, ISBN 0 330 48565 2.

People who revered him, like Ford Madox Ford and Joseph Conrad, called him "*cher maître*" or "the master". The person in question is none other than Henry James. He was "the master" because he elevated novel writing to a respectable art form. Before he arrived on the scene, novels tended to be large, loose, baggy monsters; at least many of them did. To be true, a good few of James's own novels are not exactly short either, but they are supreme houses of fiction. Dislocate one brick, and the entire edifice will collapse. You can take a whole wall out of Dickens, Thackeray or Trollope, let alone Fielding and Smollett, and nothing will budge. But not only did James practise novel writing with an unprecedented mastery, he also lent it a solid theoretical foundation through the many essays and the prefaces to his books. The only obligation to which we may hold a novel, he argues in "The Art of Fiction", is "that it be interesting". Furthermore, he notes: "A novel is in the broadest definition a personal, a direct impression of life [...]". In this sense, *The Master* is Tóibín's personal fictional impression of James's life, or rather a sizeable part of it. To quote "the master" once more: "The execution belongs to the author alone; it is what is most personal to him, and we measure him by that".

The novel covers events in James's life from the ignominious failure of his play *Guy Domville* in January 1895 to some months prior to the day he shaved his beard off in the spring of 1900. That is to say, these events constitute the immediate narrative present, as it were, the chronological story-line, if that is the term. Embedded into these is a wide-ranging variety of occurrences, impressions and experiences spanning James's past from his adolescence onwards. What precisely is it that Tóibín has singled out for treatment? We open with Henry waking from a troubled sleep. He has dreamed about hurrying in a dark, or darkening, city, an old place in Italy like Orvieto or Sienna. He cannot now remember whether he was alone there or whether he had a companion. If so, it must have been a "ghostly companion" (p. 2). He also dreamt of dead members of his family: his Aunt Kate, his sister Alice and his mother:

> in that square he had locked eyes with his mother, and her gaze was full of panic, her mouth ready to cry. She fiercely wanted something beyond her reach, which she could not obtain, and he could not help her. (p. 3)

I confess to being at a loss as to the meaning and significance of that ominous scene; but what seems clear is that from the first a note is introduced which James himself framed in a letter to Morton Fullerton of 10 February 1900 in these terms: "the *essential loneliness of my life*". The three woman are in the dream because they were among the most important people in his life. There were two other women, but more of them later.

It is, of course, tempting to check what Tóibín presents of James's life against the facts gathered in biographies by, say, Leon Edel or Fred Kaplan. But such an effort might easily turn into a fruitless task, because Tóibín could always plead poetic licence. Suffice it to say, though, that he has not played havoc with the known facts and introduced strange matter. Indeed, he has at times been so scrupulous in observing the facts that there are stretches in the text which read as if they had been lifted straight out of Edel or Kaplan. All this is not to say that Tóibín has not let his creative imagination do some work towards embellishing and interpreting James's life and character. However, do we get another, a fuller, richer picture of "the master" than we would get by perusing a straight biography? That, of course, is the crucial question when measuring Tóibín's efforts.

James fell in love with younger men several times. One of them was Paul Joukowsky. He is evoked in the first chapter with poignancy. James remembers a scene in Paris in which he stood in front of the house Paul lived in at the time, trying to attract Paul's attention. He attempted to write a story about this experience, but never finished it, could not finish it. For the "rest of the story", describing the actual encounter, "was imaginary, and it was something he could never allow himself to put into words" (p. 13). The thing which he most needed to write, his innermost feelings and desires, would never be seen or published, would never be known or understood by anyone. This is part of the essential loneliness of his life: that he could never express, always had to conceal what moved him most. In the mid-1890s, Henry fell in love a number of times, for instance with Jonathan Sturges and Morton Fullerton; each time, he placed the emphasis on friendship, not on physical consummation, which remained as dangerous, as threatening, as morally and culturally difficult for him as it had always been. Recalling Tóibín's *The Story of the Night*, one could have suspected that the author would happily seize opportunities for capitalising on James's latent or overt homo-erotic leanings by incorporating some gay scenes. Yet, fortunately (in my inconsequential estimate), when he does so, it is all done in the best of taste. In May 1899 Henry fell for the Norwegian sculptor Henry Andersen. The chapter devoted to this relationship is one of the most impressive in the book. Tóibín empathetically plays off Andersen's egomaniacal interests against James's experiencing a "strange glow of happiness" (p. 387). Visiting Henry at Lamb House in Rye, the sculptor is brimming over with his ambitions to make a mark on the world, and Henry, obviously uneasy about the nature of his feelings, at one point turns away from him, "facing towards the window with no idea why his eyes had filled with tears" (p. 404). That is excellent rendition, indeed. Tóibín is well-advised not to

make more of James's infatuation, because as Leon Edel notes in this respect: "The question that may be asked is whether the use of the term 'lover' and the verbal passion of the letters, was 'acted out'. The question, if relevant, cannot be answered. We simply do not know".[1]

The additional two women mentioned above were Henry's cousin Minny Temple and Constance Fenimore Woolson. He was deeply devoted to both of them. A impressive chapter is given to each woman, and what comes brilliantly across is James's ambivalent relationship with the female sex. He could only love women from a distance, being attracted to them and fearing them at the same time. Minny may well have been the one woman love of his life. She certainly formed the model for many of his heroines (cf. for example *The Portrait of a Lady*), having belonged to the part of him he guarded most fiercely, his hidden self. Woolson was a person he knew he could trust completely, someone he could remain close to while becoming distant, if he needed. She committed suicide, and James afterwards first tormented himself with feelings of having failed her, before convincing himself that he had owed her nothing, and had made her no promises that were binding. Nonetheless, a sense of guilt remained and kept lacerating him.

There are, no doubt, richly commendable things in the novel; but there are also, one feels sorry to say, matters to the contrary. At present, it would seem from the way commas are used that people are trying to get rid of the distinction between a restrictive and a non-restrictive relative clause. Newspapers are full of this moronic practice. But to find the same, nay, what is worse, quite a desultory handling of commas in a book by a serious-minded writer, such as Tóibín, is quite annoying. "[...] waving at Henry who stood fully clothed, enjoying the sun" (p. 401) There should, at least for my money, be a comma after "Henry'. This is just one of myriad such examples, and one would not mind if Tóibín were consistent in leaving out the commas altogether. But, strangely, some times they are there, and at other times they are not. Tóibín is a very busy man, he is almost ubiquitous. You meet him at conferences, and he is to be found everywhere in print and publishing. Perhaps he simply does not have the time to put in all the necessary commas. And what's in a comma, anyway?

James is frequently described as having supper or treating his guests to supper. Now, Henry James would never have had supper, at any rate not when entertaining. He would most decidedly have had dinner. Chapter 4 deals with events leading up to Oscar Wilde's trial in 1895. It includes scenes, involving Sturges, Gosse and James, in which the three men discuss the case. James detested what he saw as Wilde's combination of elegant vulgarity and theatrical cleverness, and all that these scenes manage to bring out is James's ambivalent attitude towards homosexuality. This apart, they add up to pretty small beer, or are even rather inane. It is no surprise why Tóibín should have chosen them and left out more significant aspects of James's life, such as those which could have shown why and how James elected to become a writer. Chapter 7 moves back to the time of the American Civil War and concerns itself with relationships in the James family, among other things throwing into relief the guilt of the brothers William and

Henry at not having volunteered to join up as well as showing Henry grappling with Hawthorne and reading Saint-Beuve instead of studying law at Harvard. Moreover, the first story Henry published is mentioned, but all this does next to nothing towards making intelligible James's choice of his vocation. The text suggests that certain incidents and experiences during that period in his life brought it home to him fiercely "how deeply real and apart [his] self was" (p. 231), an apartness that was to characterise his subsequent existence, but why and how this should have been remains curiously vague. We have only Tóibín's word for it, and this is just one example among quite a few where there is too much telling and not enough showing.

After his traumatic experiences with *Guy Domville* James developed, out of his work for the stage, a new narrative style. This, his mature narrative method may be termed dramatic, because he henceforth proceeded much in scenic fashion and worked on the basis of extensive quasi-theatrical scenarios. I, for one, would have liked Tóibín to have made the evolution of that descriptive method an integral part of his fictional life. What he seems to have attempted instead is to use narrative style that mimics James's: those involuted, seemingly never-ending sentences. Thomas Hardy spoke of "a ponderously warm manner of saying nothing in infinite sentences", and H.G. Wells characterised James's prose style thus: "it is a magnificent but painful hippopotamus resolved at any cost [...] upon picking up a pea which has got into a corner of its den". Some parts of *The Master* are like that and it makes for prolix reading. But as Sterne's Tristram Shandy has it: "Let people tell their story their own way". I raise my glass to him.

Finally, what portrait of Henry James emerges? It is the portrait of a man inconsolably pained by the past, by the loss he repeatedly had to suffer, pain and loss which only work could keep at bay; the portrait of a man harbouring a concealed self, a person adept at the art of self-effacement and addicted to refinements, of someone plagued by sexual hang-ups. Yet, do we get a richer, a profounder portrait of Henry James by reading *The Master* than we would get from straight biographies? I think not. But, then, why should Tóibín have gone to all the trouble which the writing of the novel must have involved? Your guess is as good as mine.

Note

1 Leon Edel, *The Life of Henry James*, vol. 2. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977, p. 333.