

Review

The Testament of Mary by Colm Tóibín

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COLM TÓIBÍN'S LATEST NOVELLA, *THE TESTAMENT OF MARY* (2012), forcefully critiques the process through which the Gospels were compiled by interrogating their patriarchal origin. By placing Mary in the centre of the narrative, Tóibín simultaneously gives voice to the previously silent icon of the Virgin Mary and decentres the traditional Catholic narrativisation of the life of Christ. In what follows I will discuss how *The Testament of Mary* addresses our contemporary moment through the subversive way it revisits a foundational myth, and how, by giving voice to the voiceless, it tackles the unspeakable nature of a traumatic event.

The World is a Place of Silence

Born in Ireland in 1955, Colm Tóibín was raised a Catholic. In his latest novella, Tóibín analyses events in the Roman Catholic tradition against the grain, privileging the perspective and voice of Mary, 'mother of Christ', whilst she is living in exile in Ephesus some twenty years after her son was persecuted and died on the cross. The text rotates around Mary's situation as a political refugee—that is, her flight from state persecution—and her interactions with her so-called 'guards' who visit her regularly for consultations regarding her past—a type of 're-coding'.

These men seek her help to write the Gospels, forcing her to revisit the events she has witnessed during the life of her son:

Of the two men who come, one was there with us until the end. There

were moments then when he was soft, ready to hold me and comfort me as he is ready now to scowl impatiently when the story I tell him does not seem to stretch to whatever limits he has ordained.¹

Principally, *The Testament of Mary* appropriates canonical texts in the New Testament and writes back to them, retelling the events that unfolded therein from a female perspective. The four Gospel writers, St. John the Evangelist, St. Luke, St. Mark and St. Matthew, each passed down their own versions of the events in the life of Jesus, taking pains to portray a wise and almost undefeatable man. Conversely, Tóibín's narrative is a reconstruction of the events, producing an account full of emotion and judgement via an opinionated first person narrator quite distinct from those found in the Gospels. The word 'gospel'—good spell—has an auspicious connotation, implying that the texts disseminate good news regarding the future of mankind; announcements that will endow life with a redemptive and transcendent meaning. However, Mary's reflection on the events is sombre, hopeless, and filled with brutal honesty. Like a contemporary, postmodern 'retelling', Mary's Gospel is one that will differ from any hopeful Gospel as it 'retells in different ways what has been told before'.²

Tóibín interrogates events as narrated in the Gospels by means of transferring them to the point of view of a mother and of a woman. The use of the homodiegetic narrator suggests a more intimate relationship with the reader. In addition, the narrator passes judgement on events and characters that are traditionally and dogmatically deemed to be beyond judgement. This new approach to the Gospels can be considered to reflect an increasingly secularised climate, where religion's absolute precepts, pre-established religious beliefs and liturgical conventions may be questioned and replaced with fluid boundaries. Tóibín represents this climate in Mary's temperamental and inquisitive reactions as she recalls the increasing fame and scandals in the life of Jesus: 'the power he exuded [...] made me love him and seek to protect him even more than when he had no power'.³ Mary's need to protect her son is evinced while in Cana, at the wedding where, according to the Gospels, Jesus performs the miracle of changing water into wine. She knows she needs to warn him because he is being hunted by the authorities, but Jesus decides to ignore her: "'You are in great danger,' I began but I saw immediately that it was no use, and without thinking I stood up [...] I took my belongings and made my way back to Nazareth'.⁴

According to the Gospels, Mary is the one who asks Jesus to help the bridegroom whose wine has run out and that is when Jesus performs the miracle. In Tóibín's novella, this scene is flooded with hysteria and commotion due to the presence of Jesus and of his proclamations, and so the miracle is credited to a general climate of confusion. Hence, *The Testament of Mary* subverts the image of the interceding and solicitous mother and portrays instead a woman who, albeit loving, favours the 'ordinary' material world and saves herself from the unnatural power of her son.

In the patriarchal institution of canonical literary tradition, a woman was the object of an ode, poem, novel or sonnet written by a male author, and she has always been the ideal poetic object when silent. The Virgin Mary in the Catholic tradition, moreover, is the recipient of litanies and prayers dutifully indicated by rosary beads. The poetic persona or voice is seldom a woman.

Tóibín, however, seeks to re-signify and empower one of the Bible's most solid pillars, the tower of ivory, the Virgin Mary: Literature is a 'strange institution that allows one to say anything'.⁵ It is for this reason that Tóibín's work is highly valuable to the contemporary problematic of making a subaltern

voice heard. Through his novella, the narrator ‘can say anything’ and ‘make people uneasy’.⁶ Mary needs to battle against being condemned to have her words twisted by Jesus’s fanatical followers:

I know that he has written things that neither he saw nor I saw. I know he has also given shape to what I lived through and he witnessed, and that he has made sure that these words will matter, that they will be listened to.⁷

Tóibín is here addressing the need to challenge the validity of myths that have become part of our culturally imposed conventions. He is also drawing attention to the ‘invisible’ process of manipulation of facts in written media, so prevalent nowadays. The mechanism of fabrication of a sacred moment that will elicit piety, adoration and worship from the masses was carefully crafted by those who put these words on paper. Mary, as a witness to this ‘mytho-poetic’ manoeuvre, feels compelled to retell the real version of events. To this purpose, Tóibín portrays Mary as a real human being, overthrowing the figure of the submissive mother who obeyed God; of the saccharine virgin who submissively accepted her fate. This abrogation of the biblical texts echoes the sceptical intelligence of our times. The narrative is solidified, reinforced and steered against religious belief. For example, some symbols of Catholic faith are demolished by the way Mary regards Jesus, for instance:

But by this time he had begun to talk to others, high- flown talk and riddles, using strange proud terms to describe himself and his task in the world. [...] I heard him saying that he was the Son of God.⁸

The revelation is striking: according to Tóibín’s text, Mary never believed what Jesus stridently proclaimed. This statement is just the beginning of a series of challenges to the Catholic myths and ideological teachings punctured by the narrative.

Taking an ironic stance, the narrator in *The Testament of Mary* relates Mary’s excuses for not having been present at the moment the body of Christ was taken down from the cross: ‘I would leave him to die alone if I had to. And that is what I did’.⁹ The fact that Mary is not there when Jesus is taken down enabled her not to be ‘strangled’ and silenced: another member of her party was strangled by an undercover envoy of the Romans. Escaping persecution and possible death is the only way her testimony can live on. Seeking to disrupt, therefore, an established set of beliefs, Tóibín highlights the resigned attitude to the crucifixion—‘the most foul and frightening image that had ever been conjured up by men’— as an expected and logical way to punish heretics.¹⁰ Mary’s childhood friend, Marcus, like a subverted Archangel Gabriel, announces her son’s fate:

He said that there was only one thing he had to tell me and I should be ready to hear the worst [...] He spoke flatly, firmly. “He is to be crucified” [...] And then I found myself asking a foolish question, but a question I had to ask. “Is there anything that can be done to stop this?”¹¹

Mary’s urgency to do something against the decreed fate is reinforced throughout the narrative. She repeatedly struggles against what everyone around her seems so meekly resigned to: “‘You mean he will be crucified?’ I asked [...] But then Mary [Martha’s sister] spoke: “‘But that will be the beginning.’”¹² Mary adopts a sceptical attitude when faced with the image of

her son rendered by time, fame, and followers: 'a man filled with power, a power that seemed to have no memory of years before, when he needed my breast for milk'.¹³ The degree of absurdity that Mary describes in her account of the speeches and written legacy of Jesus's followers can be equalled to barbaric talk and practice: 'When I have seen more than two men together I have seen foolishness and I have seen cruelty [...] a group of misfits [...] not one of you was normal'.¹⁴ Mary's opinion of Jesus's followers is plainly honest, and challenges the words of Jesus after his resurrection, stating that two or three gathered in his name would summon Him.¹⁵ But as she is a woman, her words are twisted and unheard. In the Roman Catholic tradition, the idea of crucifixion is associated with divine death and martyrdom; the sign of the cross is the equivalent of protection and of reverence. Strangely enough, these symbols came to be considered the foundation of civilisation and moral behaviour, as opposed to infidel practices or barbarism.

In the novella's narrative, Mary knows her life is being written about. Despite being a woman who has no power over the disciples, she gathers the courage to defend her portrayal. As the narrative progresses, Mary has the chance to describe the ludicrousness of the events that lead to Jesus's persecution and eventual execution. This behaviour serves to question the image of the mother that the Catholic Church has propagated and institutionalised in order to control the female sex: that Mary was the obedient and submissive mother and dutiful servant of God. The Bible was written, produced, and codified by men; and the Vatican remains a patriarchal institution—something ably demonstrated by the obdurate refusal to consider ordaining female priests. By releasing the voice of a central female figure in the Roman Catholic faith, Tóibín has addressed the contemporary struggle of women to provide their own perspective on events, their own approximation to reality, and their experience as women, long ignored in canonical texts.

It is important to point out that *The Testament of Mary* was written by a male author. However, Tóibín avoids speaking for the patriarchy by focusing his narrative on the exploration of a woman's sorrow, drawing attention to the contradictions that have shaped gender politics and Catholic canonical dogmas, and celebrating the occasions Mary chooses to use her own voice, epitomising narrative agency. Tóibín reinforces the idea that silence is an opportunity to make these words matter:

I do not know why it matters that I should tell the truth to myself at night, why it should matter that the truth should be spoken at least once in the world. Because the world is a place of silence.¹⁶

The world being a place of silence gives Mary the opportunity to be heard. In the Bible and in Catholic liturgy, Mary is portrayed as not speaking, interfering or questioning. However, in this novella, she fragments and destabilizes the pre-established 'grand narrative' of the Catholic Church, states truths, announces decisions, passes judgement, and propagates her testimony in the name of all women who were forced into silence by men. She is inspired to do this by the figure of the goddess Artemis, part of another mythic conception of religion imposed on the Jewish people by the Romans, but to whom she retells her experiences and in whom she finds solace. The figure of Artemis remains her only confident and first audience:

I bought from one of the silversmiths a small statue of the goddess who lifted my spirits. And I hid it away [...] I could whisper to it in the night if I needed to. I could tell it the story of what happened and how I came

here.¹⁷

The image of the goddess Artemis is a symbol of strength and endurance for Mary, who sees her as: 'radiating abundance and bounty, fertility and grace, and beauty'.¹⁸ She sees in Artemis the qualities that will be bestowed on her according to Catholic Liturgy, 'Hail Mary, full of grace, [...] blessed is the fruit of thy womb'.¹⁹ Silence frames Mary's sceptical attitude towards the rumours that other people bring to her about Jesus's miracles. She tries to find proof of these miracles in her friends, as she did after Lazarus's resurrection: 'Later, when I found Miriam alone, I asked her if she had personally been in the crowd that day and she smiled and said no, but she had heard all the details from several who had witnessed it all'.²⁰ Mary responds with silence at the time, because she cannot voice her disbelief. She knows there will be time later for her voice to overthrow silence, when she engages in a deluge of detailed memories about Jesus's passion and death; not by resorting to fragmented narrative but by apprehending the events fully.

The first powerful agent in the treatment of traumatic experiences is memory. However, memory is not always reliable and can be blocked by the self's defence mechanisms:

In fiction, precisely, because it is free to say anything, there is often an access to manipulation of collective memory [...] there are traumas in collective memory as well, communal events in a traumatic past that are hard to speak about or to focus on. Fiction can bring these out.²¹

The inability to voice certain events, due to their 'unspeakable' nature, can create a gap between the event and the language that is used to make it manifest. The unspeakable and the incapacity to refer to an ineffable act of cruelty is, however, an obstacle that Tóibín's Mary overcomes. Forced to remain silent, impassive and still during the crucifixion, lest she too be arrested, Mary shifts her attention to the words she will carefully craft to make her excruciating confession: 'gaps and strange shifts create a sort of narrative nausea'.²² The nausea is revealed by the excessive detailing of the cruelty depicted. By remembering too much, Mary as a narrator is an exception; she is amazingly articulate and at the same time haunted by her ability to remember: 'memory fills my body, as much as blood and bones'.²³ In Tóibín's text, we find a detailed and, at times, ruthless description of the cruellest practices in the climax of the narrative: 'As jets of blood spurted out and the hammering began as they sought to get the long spike of the nail into the wood, crushing his hand and his arm against the cross as he writhed and roared out'.²⁴

The act of conception is uniquely feminine and its place of articulation should be intimately related to Mary's representation as a mother within the Catholic tradition. By attempting to revisit the conception of her own son from their perspective, Mary's guards deprive her of her legitimate place in the narrative she should have filled with her own testimony. She cannot remain impassive when she hears their accounts about the beginning of her motherhood and needs to abrogate their version of her life. It is important to note that the image of the Virgin Mary within the Catholic tradition was not taken from the Gospels, but imposed as a chaste image for women to look up to and seek solace in during liturgical litanies, prayers and hymns. In most hymns to Mary, her purity and sweetness are praised as valuable traits.²⁵ Interestingly, it is a male author who is now freeing Mary from her virtues and purity, to portray a suffering human being. Mary re-signifies and appropriates the exercise of motherhood throughout the narrative by attaching it to the symbols

that enable her to build her identity as an individual, and by rejecting social and religious conventions dictated by her community. Mary does not obediently adopt the role of silent mother, but detaches herself from the overpowering figure of her son, favouring self-definition, embodied in her cry that admits, about her son's death, 'It was not worth it'.²⁶

According to Robert Eaglestone, 'the contemporary draws attention to what makes us human—to everyday flaws'.²⁷ Mary is not portrayed as the perfect mother figure, but as an oppressed woman in a rigid world of men, who despite imposed silence, is able to articulate her grief by grasping control of the narrative. If, therefore, Mary is able to overcome a highly-organised system of narrative manipulation, we may hope, just like Mary, that the world will loosen, and silence will be replaced by testimonies, 'knowing that these words matter'.²⁸

Notes

- 1 Colm Tóibín, *The Testament of Mary* (London: Penguin Books, 2012), p.5.
Robert Eaglestone, *Contemporary Fiction, a Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 11.
- 3 Toibin, p. 54.
- 4 Ibid., p. 51.
- 5 Eaglestone, p. 33.
- 6 Ibid., p. 33.
- 7 Tóibín, p.5.
- 8 Ibid., p. 47.
- 9 Ibid., p. 84.
- 10 Ibid., p. 58.
- 11 Ibid., p. 57.
- 12 Ibid., p. 65.
- 13 Ibid., p. 54.
- 14 Ibid., p. 10.
'For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them', Matthew 18. 20.
- 16 Tóibín, p. 86.
- 17 Ibid., p. 14.
- 18 Ibid., p. 13.
- 19 *Hail Mary*, based on Luke 1. 28-35 and 42- 48,
- 20 Tóibín, p. 39.
- 21 Eaglestone, p. 46.
- 22 Ibid., p. 55.
- 23 Tóibín, p. 4.
- 24 Ibid., p. 76.
For a collection of hymns to Mary within the Catholic tradition, see *Catholic First*, <<http://www.catholicfirst.com/thefaith/prayers/marianhymns.html#ImmaculateMary>> [accessed 20 June 2017].
- 26 Tóibín, p. 102.
- 27 Eaglestone, p. 84.
- 28 Tóibín, p. 104.

Works Cited

- Eaglestone, Robert, *Contemporary Fiction, a Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013)
Tóibín, Colm, *The Testament of Mary* (London: Penguin Books, 2012)