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Colm Tóibín was born in Enniscorthy, Co. Wexford, and educated at University College Dublin. His nine novels, including *The Master* (2004), *Brooklyn* (2009), *Nora Webster* (2014), and *House of Names* (2017), have been widely translated; he also composes works of short fiction, journalism, literary criticism, and travel writing. *The Master*, about Henry James, and *The Testament of Mary* (2012), about the mother of Jesus, represent Tóibín's major works of biofiction. In addition to having earned honorary degrees from the University of Ulster, University College Dublin, the University of East Anglia, and the Open University, he is Mellon Professor in the department of English and comparative literature at Columbia University and chancellor of Liverpool University.

BETHANY LAYNE: The first question that I wanted to ask relates to the transformation of *roman á clef* into biographical fiction toward the end of the twentieth century. I wondered if you had any thoughts on what happened around this period to give novelists this liberty?

COLM TÓIBÍN: I wonder if for each writer the needs and impulses are different. Take Penelope Fitzgerald writing *The Blue Flower*, Michael Cunningham writing *The Hours*, or John Coetzee writing *The Master of Petersburg*.[1] Each of them, I think, would insist that this need came personally rather than as part of a movement or something that was in the air. I was fascinated by *The Blue Flower* because it was very subtle, dealing with whole areas of Romanticism and feeling. Fitzgerald was actually working with an interesting set of ideas in

1. Penelope Fitzgerald, *The Blue Flower* (London: Flamingo, 1995); Michael Cunningham, *The Hours* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1998); J. M. Coetzee, *The Master of Petersburg* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1994).

some beautifully chosen sentences. And Cunningham was playing a game between the idea of *Mrs. Dalloway*, Virginia Woolf, and the present, so that was a different sort of thing. I think Coetzee was working out something quite personal, most of all his interest as a deep reader in Dostoyevsky that appears throughout his work. But I also believe that he was dealing with personal matters to do with grief—to do with things that had happened to him for which he wanted to find a metaphor. And the death of Dostoyevsky's son gave him that metaphor, offered him a way for certain feelings to be described and dealt with that he did not wish to deal with directly. Now, in the case of Henry James, I think if you were to give the immense amount of material available on him and his family to any number of people and say, "You must come up with eleven stories from this material," each person would come up with a different set of eleven stories. That would in turn tell you something about the lives and the preoccupations of all of these people.

So biographical fiction is, in a way, like all fiction, a sort of veiled autobiography made of elaborated versions of the self that would otherwise remain hidden—using the bare bones or a set of facts that are available to deliver on feelings that have not until then had a focus. This is precisely what Shakespeare and Marlowe were doing in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. They were getting bits and pieces of old stories and making plays out of them: *Tamburlaine the Great*, *Faust*, the history plays, or, indeed, *Lear* or *Hamlet*. In other words, making biofiction is not something unusual, but in the roots of the novel there are novelists who just do not work with the form. Jane Austen does not, and in general Henry James does not, although in some of his short stories he writes about the lives of writers and painters that seem close to certain people whom he knew—or close to himself. And there is something odd about these stories; you feel it would be much better if he had stuck more closely to the facts of a single painter or a writer, rather than trying to invent somebody who seems slightly too far away.

But I cannot give you a zeitgeist because I live in an imaginative country that is defined by the concrete. I live in the concrete. I cannot abstract from anything in particular to say that there was something in the air at the end of the twentieth century—meaning that a number of novelists just said, "Here it is, I'm not going to bother trying

to pretend; I'm just going to give a real name." But *The Blue Flower*, *The Master of Petersburg*, and *The Hours* seem to be particularly good novels. They seem to have taken a great deal of imaginative energy to produce, and they do not seem to me like literary exercises—and that is therefore interesting.

BL: Definitely, and this leads me to my next question. Michael Lackey mentions the need, as he puts it, to define "what the biographical novel is uniquely capable of doing."[2] And so I wondered, for yourself and for the other authors you mentioned, if you care to speculate: What does the biographical novel offer that traditional history or straight biography might not?

CT: Well, I think it is very far away from straight biography. The Leon Edel biography of Henry James tends to be chronological, analytical at times, informative at others, with footnotes.[3] Straight biography always has an argument, and if you talk to someone who has known somebody whose biography has been written, they always say, "It wasn't like that. They were not like that." And so I think that the idea that fascinates novelists in particular is how much information is actually misleading and how much has been burned and destroyed. In the end, nonetheless, a partial portrait is offered as a full portrait. And so biography, despite its footnoting and its rigorousness, can be actually a falsification of something. Since it is often just the amassing of the facts as they are available, it is not a dishonest form. But there is always a feeling that if those letters now burned were in there, it would make a difference. This is something Janet Malcolm has dealt with, for example, in her book about Sylvia Plath and biographers.[4]

To get back to your question about what the biographical novel offers, it seemed to me that I was working imaginatively. I was merely using these details about James in the same way that I would otherwise use memory, and that there really was not any difference in the process for me. I had imagined a character and I began to work with

2. Michael Lackey, ed., *Truthful Fictions: Conversations with American Biographical Novelists* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 24.

3. Leon Edel, *Henry James: A Life* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985).

4. Janet Malcolm, *The Silent Woman: Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes* (New York: Knopf, 1993).

him. He is very close to the character of Eamon Redmond, who is a High Court judge, in my second novel, *The Heather Blazing* [1992]. That similarity is something that nobody noticed, but that is fine with me since I do not need people to notice things. I am using judges, I am using the court, and I am using certain years in the Irish court system, along with a middle-aged man who is alone a great deal of the time. He has a certain sort of power, is haunted by certain memories, and is trying to function in a public world, or in some relationship between the private world and the public world. One character is a judge and the other is a named writer. But the difference in the way I worked was not great. With *The Master* [2004], when I was starting in the morning, I could find something by James to read. But with the judge I could often go back to [read] a judgment of the courts. I had spoken to great numbers of judges because I had written a short history of the Irish Supreme Court. So I had all that to come back to: where the rooms were, what the corridors were like, how those men spoke. I had all of that research done, and I was thus able to imagine putting flesh—putting blood or something—into the body where the bones already were. So I was doing that both times.

BL: In your lecture for the Henry James Society, you mention that the character of James came to you in a similar way to the protagonist of that earlier novel.[5] So you see the biographical novel, I take it, as more of a subgenre of literary fiction than as a sister genre to biography?

CT: Oh, I do not even see it as a subgenre. The previous novel I had written was called *The Blackwater Lightship* [1999], set in rural Ireland in the early nineties. It has six characters and happens over seven days. It has a lot of Irish memory, Irish weather, and intense family relationships—that lower-middle-class Irish environment. When it was done, I myself was done. It was a very intense book to write, and I did not want to produce such a book again. Coming to the James material in the aftermath of that, I wanted something with greater amplitude that looked at a character who had many more choices and chances than the characters in the previous novel. So I think *The*

5. Colm Tóibín, "A More Elaborate Web: Becoming Henry James," *The Henry James Review* 30:3 (Fall 2009): 227–36.

Master has to be seen against the background of that novel written just before, rather than a wider context. But the biographical novel is not a subgenre—it is just another thing that I did.

BL: So it was the right time for you to write about James as much as anything?

CT: Yes.

BL: OK. I wonder if we could consider an idea that Max Saunders puts forward about the truism that "most writers spend too much time writing to have otherwise eventful lives," which seems to be undermined by the number of biographical novels about writers.[6] As you mentioned yourself, we have *The Hours* and *The Master of Petersburg*. I just wondered why writers might be appealing subjects, and why James in particular might have been so appealing?

CT: I think Max Saunders's point is interesting because one of the problems writers have is that we do not actually have jobs. I know my colleague John Lanchester, for example, is good on the subject of hedge funds, but I am not. I have also not done a great deal of physical work like digging roads. Henry James is particularly bad at people having a job; he really is not good on the subject of how they make their money. And that is not something one would read Virginia Woolf for either. In *The Good Soldier* [1915], the Ford Madox Ford novel, one wonders what it is people do. When everybody else seems to go to work in the morning, so many characters in fiction do not seem to go to work in the morning, and when they do, it is often terribly interesting because we are getting something we are not quite used to. There are exceptions to this in the work of Lanchester or Don DeLillo's first novel *Americana* [1971]—novels about work. Such fiction does not come automatically or as easily, however, as novels about sitting at home doing nothing much. The other thing is that in the case of Henry James, it might seem that nothing much happened to him. But in fact one of his closest friends committed

6. Max Saunders, "Master Narratives," *Cambridge Quarterly* 37:1 (March 2008): 128.

suicide and he was made to feel partly responsible. He knew a great deal of disappointment—books that obviously did not sell and all of that. But there was also, more importantly, the question of his sexuality that often makes its way into the books in the form of secrets that, if known, would be explosive, which obviously came from the life he lived. So the fact that people are just writing does not mean that they are not also in love, or worried about money, or desperate in some other way—and all of these emotions make their way into fiction. But I think the question of work remains open. I am not aware of many novels, other than Graham Greene's, about being a civil servant [i.e., *The End of the Affair*, 1951]. William Carlos Williams wrote a book about being a doctor [*The Doctor Stories*, 1984], but I am not aware of a good novel about what it is like to be a nurse. Are you?

BL: Well, there is a section in *Atonement*.[7]

CT: *Atonement* does deal with that. And in *Saturday* we have a brain surgeon and McEwan has scientists.[8] But in general I would divine that writers are not especially concerned with work, but with the emotions that a lot of people live with—worry, depression, exhilaration, lust, hunger. These things can actually make their way into novels directly from the writer's most shallow and deepest preoccupations.

BL: I would now like to turn to film and fiction. A great appetite was created by the nineties film adaptations of James. I am thinking here of the Jane Campion *Portrait* [1996], but also of the Merchant Ivory adaptations of *The Wings of the Dove* [1997] and *The Golden Bowl* [2000]. Could you see your way to a James biopic—perhaps even an adaptation of *The Master*—or is there something uniquely appropriate about the novel as a form?

CT: Somebody bought the rights at one point to *The Master*, but a film was never made. I think what you would have to do is take a single episode, such as the relationship with Constance Fenimore Woolson, and work with that single episode. And you would almost have to

7. Ian McEwan, *Atonement* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2001).
8. Ian McEwan, *Saturday* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2005).

do it as a single story rather than as a biopic. People were talking about having Simon Russell Beale play the part of James, and that interested me because he is mainly a stage actor and really not as well known as he should be. He is certainly somebody who would be new if he appeared on the screen playing the lead part in a film. So it did not seem to be impossible, but it would require the right screenwriter—certainly not me, anyway.

BL: Maybe there is something useful about a lesser-known actor, one who would not necessarily trail a huge star persona?

CT: Yes, so it seemed to me that Simon Russell Beale would make a real difference in that he would bring something almost from the nineteenth century—this idea of a pre-film world. But it has been a long time since anyone mentioned the plan, so I do not think it is on anyone's agenda.

BL: I was very interested to learn about your working title for *The Master—The Turn of the Century*—which seemed to me to communicate an interest in James's time period as much as in James himself. Perhaps you could say a little about whether that is true, and about the biographical novel and the historical novel: Would you want to see those as distinct?

CT: I do see them as distinct, and I will give you an example of how. Sometime in about 1896, Henry James has his apartment in Kensington wired for electricity. Now this is a huge moment. Just imagine it: people coming in, setting up where the lights are going to be, the switches. The whole business with oil and gas lamps is going, and this new thing is coming. I think all of that belongs to a historical novel. If you are writing a historical novel, this is a marvelous scene where you are actually getting a key moment in history and integrating it into lives; you are seeing what the next day will be like. All I knew was, it would ruin my novel. It would be the end of the novel. It would just take a few pages to do, and you would just sigh, because I cannot dramatize this.

Instead, I must be in James's mind all the time, I must be living with his preoccupations, and I cannot start thinking about what age

Queen Victoria is or the about the details of interiors. I just cannot get involved with that. On the other hand, I found out that James was with his brother William, his sister-in-law Alice, and his niece Peggy at the end of December 1899, and that what was going to happen next was really extraordinary. In the first four years of the twentieth century Henry James produced three masterpieces: *The Wings of the Dove* [1902], *The Ambassadors* [1903], and *The Golden Bowl* [1904]. With the exception of Shakespeare in certain years like 1599 or 1606, when he wrote *Hamlet* and *Lear* but also two or three other works, we do not really have anything like that. James's books took, it seems, a year each to write. And they are long, they are complex, and they represent a flourishing of the novel's form, of what it is that James had been striving toward. There is the inwardness of the characters, the sense of them as complete, of the lives being completed by the author. All three novels have very intricate plots, which are actually quite gripping. Two of them have been made into films for the simple reason that there is a drama inherent in them; *The Ambassadors* awaits its film.

But in regard to what this business of what the "turn of the century" meant for James? He really did not think that his whole life had been building up to the turn of the century when he would be left alone in Lamb House. He moved there in 1897, and at the very end of my book, after William and his family have gone, there he is. Some readers will know, and some of them will not know—but it does not really matter—that this extraordinary energy in him is now going to be harnessed. So that was my interest in the "turn of the century." Rather than the end of an epoch—the death of Queen Victoria or the beginning of a new era in history—it was the beginning of something psychologically and artistically significant for James.

BL: And you lead up to that so well with those little gems you give him, like the scene in the antique shop with Lady Wolseley.

CT: What I was trying to do was give you the extra pleasure, if you knew those late books such as *The Golden Bowl,* of thinking, "Oh my God! That's where he's getting that antique shop!" I was putting things like that in—but being really careful not to do it too much—almost as a sort of a joke I was having with a certain reader. It is like something I would put in from home, something very local, that only

people from my town would fully understand. But I am aware also that people outside of the town who read the book will not get that joke—will not get the implications of something. So it is the same idea of just stitching in little private things, little funny references. I think composers can do it—put in a tiny bar that is taken from Haydn or Shostakovich, while knowing that only the composers in the audience will know what they have just been playing with. So it is odd, since you get a funny little moment of mischief or a private moment with two or three readers. But I try not to do it too much because it is self-indulgent.

BL: Since you raised the question, I would like to think a bit more about different readers and different readerships. I ask this question because I recently taught *The Master* in an undergraduate course about biographical fiction in which the vast majority of students had not come across James—or if they had, they had perhaps read one story. I just wondered how you saw the text working for such novice readers of James? Do you have a sense of responsibility to introduce them to his work?

CT: No, I did not see the book as a responsibility in that way, as being an introduction to James. I really do not care if anyone reads James or not. I mean it would be nice for them if they did, if they would like that sort of book. My responsibility was to the actual reader of my book—to say, "My contract with you is that you can read this book without feeling undermined if you have not read any other book in your life." And I have just done the same thing with *House of Names* [2017], in which you can read the story of the House of Atreus without ever having been to a play, read any Greek history, or known anything whatsoever about these characters. In both cases that is quite important for me—that you could pick this book up as the first book you would read or the only book you would read. And it would contain a world without you feeling, "I'm not qualified to read this book," or "This book is only for a certain sort of person and I am not that sort of person." I really would not want that.

BL: And how about the transition you made from writing *The Master* to writing criticism about James? I am thinking of the essays that

Susan Griffin collected in *All a Novelist Needs*.[9] That must have been a really interesting process.

CT: What happened was that people started to think I knew a great deal about James and that I should write introductions to books and essays and reviews. I was still living in the afterglow of *The Master* and was absolutely fascinated. Every time a new book came out about James, I would immediately read it in the same way as people who read everything about Napoleon or Mary Queen of Scots. But because I was fascinated by James, I kept saying yes. And I found that I built up opinions about James and his work that I had not really had before I wrote the novel, so I began to write criticism. That was nice. It was indoors work and it kept me out of harm's way.

BL: An interesting way of putting it!

CT: But one book I need to mention to you is *Mrs. Osmond* [2017], by John Banville, a sequel to *The Portrait of a Lady*. It takes place from the time Isabel leaves Gardencourt following the death of Ralph Touchett and makes the train journey to London, and then focuses on what she is going to do when she goes back to Rome. It is very well written and emotionally accurate. The things she is noticing and seeing in London, the hotel, her time in Paris and Florence, her memory, her relationship to her maid: All of these are exquisitely rendered. I was reading it late last night and I am not finding it a pastiche; I am not finding any false notes. It seems to me to be a genuine thing. I have not come across that before, a serious artist doing a sequel. Sequels tend to have what Henry James, talking about historical fiction, called a "fatal cheapness"—and then suddenly one comes along and it is not that.

BL: I am looking at rewrites of *The Portrait of a Lady*, including Kirsten Tranter's *The Legacy* [2010], but I had not known of any sequels, so you have just made my day with that one. I now have a question about the freedom of biographical fiction and where that might end.

9. Susan M. Griffin, ed., *All a Novelist Needs: Colm Tóibín on Henry James* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010).

Does the biographical novelist have the right to invent and take liberties? Maybe you could speak about an instance where you yourself have taken such liberties?

CT: This is a really difficult question. Oddly enough, the fewer liberties you take with the main character the better. You cannot just bring him to America at a time when he did not go to America; it is better to stick to the facts. But in the case of *The Master*, Henry James did go to Dublin at that time, he did stay in that house, those people are there, that ball takes place. But the servant Hammond is made up because I needed something to happen to him in the night—and I brought that character in. James's response to Hammond contributes to the character I am building for him. I am not sure the word is responsibility, because as a writer you can do anything you like. But I think from the reader's point of view there is a sort of contract that says, "More or less, I am sticking to the facts here. More or less, this is how I imagine this man lived in these years." What I am doing then is trying to imagine what life might have been like from his side, his perspective—how he might have felt all this and lived all this. Now I noticed, for example, that there was one review of the book that said Henry James was much funnier and much better company; people described him as somebody who was really quite ironically witty—and this was a person who was not much in the book. But that is because what I am working from a deep interior, a place within him. Not his social, but his private self. So I am not then too worried about that criticism. It doesn't really bother me.

But I am following the facts more or less with him. I do not bring him to Italy when he did not go to Italy, I do not have him buying a house when he did not buy a house. So I do not take any liberties in that sense because he is not a fictional character. He is already there. There are facts that you have to deal with, and the facts become nourishing as well as restricting. That he leased Lamb House in that particular year becomes a nourishing fact. If I make up that he stayed in London another year, it does not nourish me. It almost goes back to your very first point that I have been denying until now—saying that *The Master* is a work of pure imagination—whereas I am looking at particular obsessions of my own. Nonetheless, in the rules I set myself, I think I have a duty—although duty is a funny word. Let

me get this right: The more I stick within the framework of the facts, the more I get from them. The more I feel that this is real and I have to make it more real, the more I have to make it seem to matter on the page. You are anchored—you are getting an anchor from certain facts—and that anchor is not merely factual but emotional. It brings a great deal with it, it carries you. And because it carries you, you can get a great deal of energy from it. Whereas if you are fabricating, something dissolves that is more than merely your relationship to the fact. A set of feelings dissolves or becomes diffuse. It is something like that.

BL: So any invention has to exist within that overall truth framework?

CT: The inventions could be through side characters and, obviously, dialogue. You have no dialogue, but you know that James was in Rome then, or he was in Venice then, or he got that letter from his brother then. And that somehow or other acts as an anchor and gives you some further grounding that is emotional as well as factual.

BL: It seems a little churlish now to go to Jonathan Dee's very hostile view of the biographical novel taken from an essay called "The Reanimators." He calls it the "art of literary grave robbing." He describes the biographical novel very much as an attempt to cash in, as "grabbing up the genuine cachet these geniuses still deliver."[10] I wondered if you could respond to this idea that writing about historical figures is somehow derivative.

CT: He does have a point—the problem with his point is that it is not very interesting. All fiction takes its bearings from things that have happened in one way or another. It would be very hard to think of a pure novel, and the real grave robbing, oddly enough, is often done from people who are alive by using things that belong to your life, and belong to you, and offering them to the world as though they are fictional when they are actually true. I will give you an example that I discovered in a biography of Saul Bellow. A great deal of *Her-*

10. Jonathan Dee, "The Reanimators: On the Art of Literary Graverobbing," *Harper's Magazine* 298:1789 (June 1999): 76–84.

zog [1964] happened, and his wife did indeed run away with a man with only one leg. I was horrified—really horrified. I had thought that Bellow made all of that up. There is always a problematic relationship between a novel and life, but it is something that often only the novelist knows: little things and big things. And there is an element of ruthlessness in how novelists proceed in relation to that relationship. I have never known any novelist to say, "I cannot write that because it will hurt somebody's feelings." People tend to write it and worry about it later, or deny it, or try to wriggle out of it. Well, it is not an easy thing to wriggle out of.

However, Jonathan Dee's point is right when you look at Shakespeare making his plays about kings who were recognizable or Goethe deciding he would write a version of *Faust*. So what are you going to go and see? Only a play by Goethe, which is some "pure" invention of his? Or are you just going to go and see *Faust* because it has already had a marketing campaign that has been going on for a number of centuries? So too, if you are going to write a novel about Virginia Woolf, Dostoyevsky, Novalis, Henry James, Shakespeare, or Marlowe, you do not have to explain to the reader, "Oh, this is just some rural Irish event that occurred in my imagination." You already have a campaign that has gone on before you. There is also the element of a publisher saying, "Hold on a minute, are you going to write for me a novel about Tolstoy, or are you going to write me a novel about your bachelor-uncle who lived on a farm?" The thing is, the bachelor uncle novel could end up being a better book, but it is a harder sell. I think that someone like [novelist] Marilynne Robinson has proven to us that you can get the most provincial people and give them an extraordinary glow and aura. On the other hand, Michael Cunningham, in that extraordinary opening of *The Hours*, can actually dramatize the suicide of Virginia Woolf with a great deal of deeply held feeling. Or indeed John Coetzee has Dostoyevsky arriving in the morgue to identify his son, which is not merely unforgettable, but oddly pure in its procedures. I think there is a difference between reading something, getting the feeling from it, and thinking about it later—whether or not it was morally right. This is probably the difference between where I am and where Jonathan Dee was. I suppose the point is really that if it is done well, if you can make it work, just do it. Do not worry, just do it and get the next sentence right.

BL: To come back to *The Master* and to James's own narrative innovations, I wondered how far you felt your style in that text was influenced by James—was, in a way, Jamesian? And what you thought about the point that Benjamin Markovits raises that it would be "impossible to 'do' late James"?[11]

CT: I think Banville's book is involved with James's style and having fun with it, so I do not think anything is impossible. But what I was using more than anything else was the question of point of view, the question of consciousness. Everything in *The Master* is known or seen by James only, and he is the only one who notices, remembers, sees, and feels in the book; everything is told through his eyes. You can call it third-person intimate; it is something that James refined and did a great deal with. And I was also attempting to write most of the book as though Hemingway had not lived—in other words, as though the great advance that Hemingway made in prose, which was simplifying things, breaking sentences down to something very simple, had not occurred. I was using broader brush strokes. It would be as though a painter now was painting as though in the period before Impressionism, and certainly before Cubism. I was attempting to give myself the freedom (or the restriction) of that. Once I started, once I got the first notes, I had a sort of sound for the book in my ear. But the main thing I got for the book was the single consciousness.

BL: For the final couple of questions, I would like to move on to two of your other novels, *The Testament of Mary* [2012] and *Brooklyn* [2009]. You say you are keen not to think of biographical fiction as a subgenre, so you may not want to think of biblical fiction in the same way. But I just wondered how, if at all, you might categorize *The Testament of Mary*. How different was the experience of writing about a biblical character rather than a historical or purely invented one?

CT: I think the point of *The Testament of Mary* is its form. It is short and written in the first person. So it is a novel for a voice, with quite a strong connection to cantata, aria, or recitative—or indeed mono-

11. Benjamin Markovits, "Colm Tóibín, *The Master*," in *The Good of the Novel*, ed. Liam McIlvanney and Ray Ryan (London: Faber, 2011), 199.

logue in the theatre. It really is connected to voice in a way that—and I hesitate to say this—you get in Molly Bloom's soliloquy: a woman suddenly, out of the blue, coming to speak. So I did not see it in a biblical context, but more of in a formal literary context.

BL: I listened to the audio book with Meryl Streep reading it, and it felt like a curiously appropriate form.[12]

CT: Yes, just the way she builds up the tone, the sort of hushed beginning and the sounds she makes. Also I have seen it performed in the theatre about five or six times with different actresses, and each brought something different to it. But I did not see it in the context of any other biblical text as much as I saw it in the context of moments in Greek theatre, especially with Electra, Medea, and Antigone, in which by using a woman's voice, a sort of powerlessness becomes power. That was the idea.

BL: And moving on to *Brooklyn*, is it right to read the novel as a reimagining of *The Portrait of a Lady*?

CT: That is an interesting question. There is actually a scene early on in *Brooklyn* that is taken almost entirely—and I even used a key sentence—from *Pride and Prejudice*. They are at a dance and Jim Farrell does not want to ask Eilis to dance—and it is almost exactly like what Darcy does to Elizabeth early on in *Pride and Prejudice*. I was using the scene down to the smallest detail, with Jim watching her and just not liking her in some way. But I think toward the end I am certainly using *The Portrait of a Lady*, where Isabel has gone back to her husband and Eilis has gone back to Brooklyn. But the middle part is much more of a line I would draw between *Mansfield Park* and James's *Washington Square*. The plot is almost the same idea as in *Mansfield Park*: You get a shy young woman, who is stubborn and has very deep feelings, and you bring her into a new household and record what she notices and sees in this exile of hers. So there is a lot of Fanny Price in the creation of Eilis Lacey, but also of James's

12. Colm Tóibín, *The Testament of Mary*, read by Meryl Streep, CD Audiobook (New York: Simon and Schuster Audio, 2013).

Catherine Sloper, in the way in which she feels deeply while people do not quite rate her or notice her. There are a lot of things I was taking in because I was teaching those books. Teaching has a funny effect on me, perhaps more than it does on students. I become really involved because I am really trying to think something through and work out a scene's power—how a scene is built. So those books I had been teaching, because of the intense reading they involve, came to me as experience—as though I had known these characters. When I began to write *Brooklyn*, I was using quite a lot of things that I felt I knew or belonged to me. But actually sometimes they are from books.

BL: So you would not want to draw a distinction between using so-called real-life detail versus using detail from other texts?

CT: I mean there is real-life detail in the book as well, because just before I wrote the book, I had been living in Texas and I had been homesick, so I was using that. I was using my town and my mother's younger sisters, the names of streets in the town, and the place Eilis worked—all of that is real. Anyone who is from Enniscorthy will say, "Oh my God, that is exactly it, you have named it." I am using things in the same way as with James; I am using facts as anchors, and then I am using stories that I have heard, things that I have felt, and bits of things that I have felt from reading. They all make their way into the book.

BL: So there is no differentiation, then, in terms of the liberties you have?

CT: Not when you are working. I think there might be when you are thinking. But my job is to try to think as little as possible when I am working. I am busy imagining and controlling the rhythm. Asking novelists to think while they are working is like asking singers to think when they are singing. I am just trying to work out what is the next thing I am going to put down on the page. And there is the idea that *Brooklyn* is about a figure who is mainly passive. People complain that she does not have a strategy or a big plan for her life, and I say to go back and look and ask yourself if we can only have people with great big plans in novels. And there are critics, people who are other-

wise intelligent, who think that Jane Austen's Fanny Price is not a great creation, whereas I think she is a superb creation. And what James did with Catherine Sloper is the hardest thing to do—to take somebody who is almost living in her own aftermath, who is living in her own shadow, who just does not assert herself, who does not necessarily have a strategy that she is going to fulfill. Isabel Archer is, on the other hand, fully strategic in that sense; she wants her life. Elizabeth in *Pride and Prejudice* wants her life. Dorothea in *Middlemarch* and Gwendolyn in *Daniel Deronda* are easier figures to make than these young girls. These more shy and diffident figures, they are harder to make. But certainly, when I was making Eilis, I had been really trying to impress upon students, "Please, pay real attention to Fanny Price and Catherine Sloper."

BL: Does Nora Webster have a strategy, would you say?

CT: Yes, she does. There is no room that she comes into in which she is not a vivid presence, whereas Eilis Lacey is not a vivid presence—so they are entirely different. It is almost that the younger sister is Eilis and the older sister, the assertive one, is Nora Webster. And I used exactly that same system in *House of Names*, where Orestes is the shadowy one, the one who has no strategy, who just cannot work out who he should be in the world.

BL: How was it seeing Saoirse Ronan play Eilis in the film?

CT: She was able to do the business that I was trying to imply but did not want to put in as an idea—which is that people actually like Eilis. Anytime they see her, they help her. You realize it every time. She is somebody who does not cast a lot of light, but she pulls in energy toward her. Saoirse was able to understand that people actually like Eilis in the book, and in the movie it is something that she worked with very well. The minute you see her, the very moment you see her, you think, "I hope it's going to be OK for her."