The Ties That Bind: A Portrait of the Irish Immigrant as a Young Woman in Colm Toibin’s *Brooklyn*

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"Why did I ever come over here?" —Toibin, *Brooklyn* 180

"Ordinary affects are the varied, surging capacities to affect and be affected that give everyday life the quality of a continual motion of relations, scenes, contingencies, emergences" —Stewart 1-2

In the past years, several writers have offered fresh takes on the typical coming-to-America saga, adding new layers to the immigrant experience or challenging our cliché expectations of immigrant idealism. Jeffrey Eugenides, for instance, has written about a hermaphrodite immigrant in *Middlesex* (2007); Junot Diaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2008) focuses on a Dominican immigrant who is an outcast, science fiction-obsessed kid; in *Netherland* (2008), Joseph O’Neill has fleshed out an immigrant version of Gatsby in the Trinidadian Chuck Ramkissoon; one of the main characters in Colum McCann’s *Let the Great World Spin* (2009) is an Irish monk who looks after the prostitutes in the South Bronx. Colm Toibin’s latest novel, *Brooklyn* (2009), marks yet another departure from conventional tales of newcomers to America in that its central character does not actually want to immigrate. Even 150 years after the famine, America was “still a choice destination for the Irish” (Almeida 4), but not for Eilis Lacey, the novel’s protagonist. With as many reasons to stay as to leave home, Eilis struggles to figure out her place in a strange new world while still bound to the old. The novel reconfigures “home” from being a static, concrete place
that grounds the immigrant’s identity to a constant negotiation of the boundaries between Ireland and America, past and present, public history and individual memory. This spatio-temporal restructuring registers the shifting conditions of relationality for immigrants, whose identity is defined as much by their experiences in Ireland as by circumstances in their adopted land. Equally important, in Eilis, Tóibín creates a memorable character who, while not given to affective excesses, is profoundly attuned to what Kathleen Stewart calls “ordinary affects,”¹ those “forces that come into view as habit or shock, resonance or impact” (1), everyday acts of accommodation that shape the course of her life both at home and away from it.

Tóibín is best known for The Master (2004), a delicately wrought novel in which he sounded the depths of Henry James’s psyche and explored the unspoken subtext of his life at a critical point in his career. Though less ambitious than The Master, Brooklyn bears out Toibin’s commitment to psychological realism, which, in a conversation with Jeffrey Eugenides, he has described as “the essential impulse” of giving a voice to what haunts the novelist, of “chart[ing] what is deeply private and etched on the soul, and find[ing] form and structure for it.” Not only is Tóibín “an expert, patient fisherman of submerged emotions” (Schillinger), but the strong emotions he evokes “from the gaps between the lines” (Yardley) are historically and socially constructed—i.e. shaped by family, community, institutions, etc.—and closely linked with discourse in complex and

¹Note that Stewart’s definition of “ordinary affects” as “surging capacities to affect and be affected” goes directly against Fredric Jameson’s famous declaration that postmodern culture is characterized by a “waning of affect” (10). In exploring the affective dimensions of ordinary life and culture, Ordinary Affects takes its place alongside other recent studies of emotion and affect, among them Rei Terada’s Feeling in Theory (2001), Brian Massumi’s Parables for the Virtual (2002), Sara Ahmed’s The Cultural Politics of Emotion (2004), Sianne Ngai’s Ugly Feelings (2005), Patricia Ticineto Clough’s The Affective Turn (2007), Jonathan Flaherty’s Affective Mapping: Melancholia and the Politics of Modernism (2008), to name but a few.
sometimes contradictory ways. Thus James's anxieties about his sexuality and literary reputation speak to the more general cultural uncertainties of the "fin de siècle."

In his analysis of the psychological and cultural implications of Toibín's marine imaginary, Liam Harte emphasizes the perspective of the solitary outsider embodied by James as well as by the major characters of Toibín's other novels, particularly The South (1990), The Heather Blazing (1992), and The Blackwater Lightship (1999). As he shows, their state of alienation reflects "the desire to escape the 'burden of history,' especially in the context of Ireland" (335), where history has been defined by two constants: Catholicism and Irish nationalism. Such an escape is, of course, impossible, as Harte shows with regard to Katherine, the female protagonist in The South, and as will be seen in the case of Eilis, though for the latter, the past—her inherited identity—is not so much a burden as a blessing. Moving readers beyond mere sentimentality, Brooklyn highlights those deep-running attachments that, on the one hand, sustain Eilis in the face of increasingly difficult emotional situations and, on the other, constrain her in building a new life in America.

Set in the early 1950s, the novel divides its story and character between Enniscorthy, a small town in Ireland's County Wexford, and the New York borough. The events are filtered through the consciousness of Eilis Lacey, a young woman who lives with her widowed mother and in the shadow of her older sister, Rose, a spirited 30-year-old whose earnings from an office job support both the family and Eilis's studies in bookkeeping. From the outset, Eilis comes across as passive, diligent, and withdrawn, an observer more than a participant in life. The novel opens with

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In answer to Lynne Tillman’s question about Katherine’s “plight and flight,” Toibín commented: "What all of us want, I suppose, more than anything, is to be able to escape from history, is to be able to say that we choose our own destiny, that there’s nobody coming after us from the past. In Ireland, it’s a big issue. I want to be through with history. I want it all over. Start again with our lives" (qtd. in Harte 336).
Eilis sitting by the window—incidentally, Henry James’s favorite metaphor for “the text as a window looking out on the world” (Felski 78)—doing her homework for her bookkeeping class when she notices Rose “walking briskly from work” (3). Before long, her energetic, elegant sister will go out for the evening to play golf, while she will have to content herself with a movie, for which Rose leaves her one shilling on her way out, or a dance in the Athenaeum with her friend, Nancy Byrne. Eilis herself is aware of her rather dull, limited existence, so when the obnoxious Miss Kelly offers her a Sunday job in her grocery shop, Eilis “realised that she could not turn down the offer. It was better than nothing and, at the moment, she had nothing” (6). Every day her mother prays that “a proper job will turn up” (22), but Eilis knows that “there was, at least for the moment, no work for anyone in Enniscorthy, no matter what their qualifications” (12). In the sluggish economy, a lot of men, among them Eilis’s three brothers, headed to England for work. One of the few lucky ones is George Sheridan, whom Nancy dreams of dating not just because he was “handsome and had a car, but he ran a shop that did a thriving business in the Market Square,” a business he would inherit in full on his mother’s death (17-18). In a scene reminiscent of Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*, Eilis accompanies her friend to the Sunday dance “resigned to the idea that if Nancy danced more than one dance with George Sheridan then she was going home on her own” (17). This she does, with as much pride as she can muster when snubbed by Jim Farrell, George’s friend (21). Though initially Jim strikes Eilis as rude and arrogant, by the end of the novel her first impressions of him turn out to be as wrong as Elizabeth Bennett’s first impressions of Mr. Darcy.

Her mother’s prayers are answered when Father Flood, a priest with whom Rose has played golf and who knew their parents years before, comes to visit for the holidays and offers to find Eilis a good-paying job in Brooklyn—parts of which, he assures her mother, are “just like Ireland,” that is, “full of Irish”
(24)—as well as suitable accommodation near his church and place of work. Thus Eilis would join thousands of postwar Irish migrants who “entered established and maturing ethnic communities and in some way needed the existing community to facilitate their transition to America” (Almeida 4). For the Irish neighborhoods in New York City were anchored by the Catholic Church: “The parish was home,” Almeida writes in her in-depth study of the Irish migration to America in the 1950s and 1980s (6). Feeling “like a child when the doctor would come to the house, her mother listening with cowed respect,” Eilis realizes she has no choice but to submit to a plan that others, ostensibly her sister, have made for her:

And then it occurred to her that she was already feeling that she would need to remember this room, her sister, this scene, as though from a distance. In the silence that had lingered, she realised, it had somehow been tacitly arranged that Eilis would go to America. Father Flood, she believed, had been invited to the house because Rose knew that he could arrange it. (24-25)

It puzzles Eilis (and us too) that should be the one embarking on this “great adventure” for which Rose is clearly better cut than she is. Eilis knows that, in urging her to seize the opportunity, Rose “was giving up any real prospect of leaving this house herself and having her own house, with her own family,” not to mention that she would also have to look after their aging mother (32). Unlike Rose, “a woman in full possession of herself” (34), Eilis has always taken for granted the conventional expectations about women at the time:

Eilis had always presumed that she would live in the town all her life, as her mother had done, knowing everyone, having the same friends and neighbors, the same routines in the same streets. She had expected that she would find a job in the town, and then marry someone and give up the job and have children. (29)

Now, therefore, “she felt that she was being singled out for something for which she was not in any way prepared” (29). All Eilis knows about life in the New World is that “while the boys and girls who had gone to England did ordinary work for
ordinary money, people who went to America could become rich.” Furthermore, she suspects that, “while people from the town who lived in England missed Enniscorthy, no one who went to America missed home. Instead, they were happy there and proud. She wondered if that could be true” (26). The rest of the novel shows this promise of happiness to be overdetermined by dramatizing the difficulty, indeed the impossibility, of severing the ties that bind its protagonist to everything she associates with home: family, friends, and place. As such, Brooklyn is essentially a coming-of-age novel that highlights the dynamic process of attaching oneself and being attached to different contexts that simultaneously situate and displace reluctant immigrants like Eilis. In her review of the book, Liesl Schillinger has perceptively observed that Eilis does not fit the profile of the typical immigrant, for “detachment isn’t part of her makeup. It has been thrust on her by women who are as attached to home and family as she is.” Stewart refers to such “forms of attachment and attention” as “points of pressure,” whose significance lies in “the intensities they build and in what thoughts and feelings they make possible” (5, 3). On this view, Brooklyn locates one “pressure point” in Rose, who makes all the necessary arrangements for Eilis to go to America despite the latter’s barely articulated misgivings. As the novel progresses, various other forces, on both sides of the Atlantic, combine to pressure Eilis into one way of life or another.

In Brooklyn, as in Tóibín’s other novels, intimations of attachment are strongly felt but rarely spoken.3 Or, in Stewart’s terms, the “ordinary affects” that propel the narrative go beyond public feelings to include “the stuff that seemingly intimate lives are made of” (2). Much of the action, in fact, takes place below

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3Tóibín’s essays, on the other hand, particularly those collected in Walking Along the Border (1987), articulate such “personal attachments, affections, and loyalties” to “family, place, and community” that account, at least in part, for his ambivalent feelings towards Ireland (Böss 23).
the surface, in the resonance of tone, gesture, and silence, in "the enigmatic expressiveness of the non-said" (Felski 36). To please her mother and honor her sister’s sacrifice, Eilis goes to Liverpool, where her brother Jack has agreed to meet her and spend the day with her before she boards a liner for New York. Eilis thinks it is strange for Jack to confide that “at the beginning he would have done anything to go home,” for “[h]e had said nothing about this in his letters. It struck her that he might have told no one, not even his brothers, how he felt, and she thought how lonely that might have been for him” (40). But Jack is not the only one who had been trying to keep his uncomfortable feelings at bay. Prior to her departure, the house struck Eilis as “unusually, almost unnaturally happy, and the meals they shared were full of too much talk and laughter. It reminded her of the weeks before Jack had left for Birmingham, when they would do anything to distract themselves from the thought that they were losing him” (30). Not only were her mother and Rose “doing everything to hide their feelings” (30), but they also could or would not speak plainly to one another. “[T]hey could do everything,” Tóibín writes, “except say out loud what it was they were thinking” (32). Neither could Eilis, who “would have given anything to be able to say plainly that she did not want to go, that Rose could go instead” (32). On both sides, behind “all the bustle and talk” (31), was the fear of letting go—“Oh, it’ll kill me when she goes,” her mother admits to a neighbor, but not to Eilis (30)—coupled with the fear of the unknown: Eilis dreaded to think that “she was going to lose this world for ever, that she would never have an ordinary day again in this ordinary place, that the rest of her life would be a struggle with the unfamiliar” (31). And yet, besides being “so utterly foreign in its systems and manners,” America “had an almost compensating glamour to it” that is lost on neither Rose nor Eilis, who “were fully alert” to “the element of romance” attached to working and living in Brooklyn (33).
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Getting there, however, is a totally different, that is, unromantic matter, as Eilis finds out during the horrible transatlantic voyage. The section that describes the horrible conditions on the liner—the cramped cabins, the communal bathroom, the seasickness—is an entertaining set piece that showcases Toibín’s sense of humor. As the ocean swells and the rocking of the ship intensifies, Eilis cannot help “feeling that she had done something wrong, that it was somehow her fault that Georgiana”—her feisty cabin-mate—“had gone elsewhere and that her neighbors had locked the bathroom door, and her fault that she had vomited all over the cabin and had not succeeded in cleaning up the mess” (46-7). If Eilis is one of those people things happen to, Georgiana is the opposite, being determined to teach a lesson to the passengers who have locked themselves in the bathroom: “Watch me dealing with them,” she says, blocking their door in anticipation of a stormy night (47). And if Eilis is used to suppressing her feelings, Georgiana expresses them freely, as when she tells Eilis about how she goes home every year to see her family: “I love seeing them all. We’re not getting any younger, any of us, so it’s nice to spend a week together” (50). On the night before they are due to dock, Eilis lets Georgiana choose a suitable attire for her when they disembark and, at her suggestion, puts on make-up so that she can exude more self-confidence. Looking at herself in the mirror, Eilis is surprised to see that she seems older but also good-looking: “It would make her less nervous in one way, she thought, but maybe more so in another, because she knew that people might look at her and have a view of her that was wrong if she was dressed up like this every day in Brooklyn” (52).

Written in the understated manner that matches Eilis’s personality, the second part of the novel opens not with her “awed first glimpse of the Manhattan skyline” (Tayler), but with her awakening from sleep in an Irish boarding house run by a Mrs. Kehoe, a respectable and rather fastidious woman who made even a poker game “sound as though it was another form of Sunday
duty that she performed only because it was in the rules” (56). The narrative is punctuated with Eilis’s observations about each of Mrs. Kehoe’s five other lodgers, as well as with reflections on Brooklyn and nostalgic recollections of Ireland, most of which she puts in her letters to her mother, Rose, and Jack. As will be seen, however, what she leaves out is equally significant, adding depth to both story and self. For “each moment appeared to bring some new sight or sensation or piece of information,” another tiny detail that stayed in her mind, and “each day, she thought, she needed a whole other day to contemplate what had happened” (60). The farther away she walks from the boarding house towards her workplace at Bartocci’s department store on Fulton Street, the stranger and more overwhelming “the real world” (61) appears to her. Indeed, the hustle and bustle of the city, with its “rushes of color or crowds of people, everything frenzied and fast,” (61) stands in sharp contrast with her quiet, relatively uneventful existence back in Ireland.

Alluding to the history of migration that distinguishes the city, McCann writes in Let the Great World Spin that “one of the beauties of New York is that you can be from anywhere and within moments of landing it is yours” (332). If this is true, then Eilis is the exception, and the challenge for her becomes how to carve out a space for herself in this culturally vibrant city. McCann’s novel, however, also features an Irish character, Corrigan, whose sensibility comes closer to Tóibín’s protagonist than to “all those people with no place yet every place inside them” (369). For listening to his Irish countrymen while he is tending bars in Queens, Corrigan reflects that “distant cities are designed precisely so you can know where you came from. We bring home with us when we leave. Sometimes it becomes more acute for the fact of having left” (59). The very image of a world spinning speaks to the desire to blur, without totally collapsing, the distinction between home and the elsewhere, the local and the universal. This may be what Tóibín ultimately wants to achieve as well: to show, in the words of another Irish
novelist, John McGahern, that “the universal is the local, but with the walls taken away” (qtd. in Andrews). Indeed, by the end of *Brooklyn* the notion of home that Eilis has carried with her ever since she left Ireland expands to include America, which, on another level, makes her a symbol of a changing, more forward looking Ireland.

Another strange aspect of the American experience for Eilis is the consumerist frenzy during the “famous nylon sale” run by Bartocci’s. As she helps the hundreds of customers, “women of all types,” a scene keeps coming to her of “an early evening in October walking with her mother down by the prom in Enniscorthy, the Slaney River glassy and full, and the smell of leaves burning from somewhere close by, and the daylight going slowly and gently” (66). This intense, albeit fleeting memory that pulls her into the past and suggests her alienation from a consumer-driven society is intimately connected to the way Eilis perceives and negotiates the new world.

Besides alluding to the rise of consumer culture after WWII, Tóibín’s portrait of the 1950s also touches on the frictions between the Irish and the Italians, as well as on discrimination against the Jews and African-Americans. A prim young woman from Belfast with “nothing good to say about anyone,” Miss McAdam embodies the Irish parochialism from which the Irish novelist has repeatedly distanced himself: “I didn’t come all the way to America, thank you, to hear people talking Italian on the street or see them wearing funny hats” (58). Elizabeth Bartocci points out to Eilis that “New people arrive and they could be Jewish,

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4 In a short essay, “The Local and the Universal,” delivered as a lecture at Listowel Writers’ Week in 2004, McGahern echoes one of his favorite authors, Miguel Torja, when he states that, “Everything interesting begins with one person in one place, though the places can become many, and many persons in the form of influences will have gone into the making of that single woman or man” (qtd. in Andrews).

5 See Tóibín’s provocative introduction to *The Penguin Book of Irish Fiction*, in which he calls for “an alternative, more liberal and cosmopolitan future,” pitting it against the baleful conservatism of the Irish nationalist tradition (Harte 336).
Irish or Polish, or even colored," but "We treat everyone the same," "like a new friend" (62). Before long, Eilis notices that the store starts selling darker colored nylons to the new black clientele moving into Brooklyn. This does not sit well with Miss McAdam, who comments that she would not like to have to serve colored customers. Mrs. Kehoe reminds her, however, that "the Negro men fought in the overseas war" and "were killed just the same as our men. . . . No one minded them when they needed them" (121). Eilis also finds that Mr. Rosenblum, her night school teacher, is a European Jew who lost his family in the Holocaust (125) and that Tony’s grandfather was killed in the First World War.

Whereas the “period feeling” of the novel has struck Jonathan Yardley as “genuine and impressive,” to Robert Hanks it feels “forced and bland, as though Tóibín is acknowledging an obligation to chronicle these things.” Herein lies another seeming difference between Brooklyn and Let the Great World Spin, for not only is the latter steeped in public history—specifically, the end of Vietnam War and suggestively, the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center—but the breadth of McCann’s vision allows him to reflect on the dislocating effects of this history on the inner life of the novel’s protagonists. It bears repeating, however, that Tóibín’s imagination is primarily drawn to the soul’s dark intimate space, plumbing its depths in a deliberate yet ultimately futile attempt to escape the burden of Irish history. Character, in other words, generates plot, which is constructed from the intricate and intermingled complexities of both inner and outer life. In McGahern’s terms, what is interesting about Brooklyn is that it begins with one person (Eilis) and one place (Enniscorthy), but as the novel progresses, other places and persons, as well as wider social forces, no matter how distantly removed from the narrative action, go into the making of that single woman.

Moreover, though Tóibín appears to place Eilis’s story in a context that heroines of the “classic” (18th and 19th century) English novels have dominated—the so-called “limited sphere”
of Jane Austen’s novels—this should not render it inferior to novels that offer social criticism or sweeping panoramas of history. In fact, as suggested earlier, by striking a delicate balance between attachment and detachment, emotion and reflection, Tóibín manages to capture the universal quality of fairly circumscribed settings. Like Austen, whom he was teaching at the time of writing *Brooklyn*, he understands that “what fills our days should fill our hearts, and what fills our hearts should fill our novels” (Deresiewicz, qtd. in Bilger). *Brooklyn* turns on inconspicuous events and affects, but its subtle force emanates from showing how these small happenings enable or disable change in the main character.

Tóibín’s seemingly deliberate choice for this kind of “banality” is refreshing, as Hanks rightly observes: “a life as ordinary as Eilis’s could easily disappear among the crowds; it takes a writer as sympathetic as Tóibín to spot her there. And it is in the banal, familiar details that his writing is at its strongest.” To quote from Tóibín’s interview with John Preston, his aim is to get “the level of detail right” so that “the reader would slowly become emotionally involved without knowing at what point that began.” More to the point, he narrates the pains and pleasures of the ordinary using a deceptively simple style marked by “tactful evasions and pregnant silences,” by inchoate sensations and half-voiced feelings (Felski 91). For instance, when Eilis tries on a bathing suit, “the intensity and sharpness of Miss Fortin’s gaze” is described as “something she knew she would never be able to tell anyone about” (161). Reading *Brooklyn*, we are “drawn into a world in which gazes meet or avoid other gazes, verbal tones and inflections weave subterranean dialogues, and bodies encircle and encounter each other in space” (Felski 91). This, in short, is the world of social interaction—what Rita Felski, following George Butte, calls “deep intersubjectivity” (91)—traversed by ordinary affects.

The emotional impact of the story is heightened by Eilis’s banal but deeply felt pangs of homesickness. When the first
batch of letters arrives from Ireland, Eilis finds “hardly anything personal in them and nothing that sounded like anyone’s own voice” (68). Nevertheless, as she reads them over and over, she realizes how little she has thought of home and yet how much she has been missing it:

Every day she had come back to his small room in this house full of sounds and gone over everything new that had happened. Now, all that seemed like nothing compared to the picture she had of home, of her own room, the house in Friary Street, the food she had eaten there, the clothes she wore, how quiet everything was. (69)

The emotional baggage she has brought with her to America has been weighing too heavily on her to be ignored anymore, but even now, as “an ache in her chest was trying to force tears down her cheeks despite her enormous effort to keep them back […] she did not give in to whatever it was” (69). This “new feeling that was like despondency” opens an old wound, that of seeing her father lying dead in his coffin and watching the coffin being closed, “the feeling that he would never see the world again and she would never be able to talk to him again” (69).

Thus the letters become painful reminders of loss—the loss of her father and of her own life in Enniscorthy—to which Eilis has tried, unsuccessfully, to numb herself since she left Ireland. Tóibín too lost his father when he was a young boy, so the passage quoted above speaks to his own “need for filial bonding,” a need which, as Michael Böss has shown, may explain his “identification with the people and the community he hails from” (24). Homesickness triggers an acute sense of dislocation in Eilis:

She was nobody here. It was not just that she had no friends and family; it was rather that she was a ghost in this room, in the streets on the way to work, on the shop floor. Nothing meant anything. . . . Nothing here was part of her. It was false, empty, she thought. (69-70)

Here, as in The Master and The South, self-estrangement is “closely linked to feelings of loss that typically stem from some unspoken childhood trauma, the repression of which causes an
enduring psychic reverberation” (Harte 334). With nothing to look forward to except sleep, in her tomb-like bedroom, Eilis feels helpless and trapped: “There was nothing she could do. It was as though she had been locked away” (70). That night she has two dreams—one suggesting her fear of disappointing and losing her mother, the other evoking a strong desire to end her unsought exile and return home. In this second dream, she is “flying, as though in a balloon, over the calm sea on a clam day,” the wind propelling her towards familiar places around Enniscorthy (71). The allusion to the Wexford coastline, Tóibín’s “intimately remembered childhood terrain,” is central to the “spatial poetics” that Liam Harte sees as underpinning his fiction (339). For like the other novels discussed by Harte, *Brooklyn* testifies to its author’s “subtle geographical imagination in which space, place, and landscape are active determinants of identity and experience rather than passive, static entities” (337). From this perspective, Brooklyn emerges as a space that plays a significant part in the construction and negotiation of identity, belonging, and notions of “home.” Indeed, her American experience turns out to be instrumental to Eilis’s transformation from a young woman susceptible to the influence of others into a woman capable of assuming control of her destiny.

Typical of Eilis, she would not to reveal anything about her soul’s torment to her family back home, even though “they would never know her now. Maybe, she thought, they had never known her, any of them, because if they had, then they would have had to realize what this would be like for her” (73). But Eilis cannot hide her anguish from Miss Fortini, her supervisor at the shop, who warns her that “you cannot work here if you’re sad” (76). Alerted to her state, Mr. Bartocci calls on Father Flood. “You’re homesick, that’s all,” he tells her. “Everybody gets it. But it passes.

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6Eilis dreams she is among a group of silent children waiting in the courthouse at the top of Friary Hill in Enniscorthy to be led away on the orders of the judge and is afraid of seeing her mother in front of the courthouse (70).
In some it passes more quickly than in others. There's nothing harder than it" (78). Suggesting that she find “someone to talk to and keep busy,” he encourages her to apply for a night class in bookkeeping and accountancy at Brooklyn College (78, 80). Since the courses are full, he intervenes on her behalf—“The power of the Holy Roman and Apostolic Church is not to be underestimated,” he tells her (80)—and pays her tuition for the first semester. On her part, Eilis recognizes that burying herself in work during the day could help her dream less about home during the night: “It would be like covering a table with a tablecloth, or closing curtains on a window; and maybe the need would lessen as time went on, as Jack had hinted it would, as Father Flood had suggested” (79). In her turn, Eilis offers to help Father Flood in the parish hall on Christmas Day, decorating the hall and serving dinners to the needy, “irrespective of creed or country of origin” (87). Most of them, however, turn out to be “leftover Irishmen” who “built the tunnels and the bridges and the highways” (88). At first, they remind Eilis of men from Enniscorthy who “drank too much,” but “by the time she served them and they turned to thank her, they seemed more like her father and his brothers in the way they spoke or smiled” (92). Later, as she joins them, along with other women, the place comes to look like “a parish hall anywhere in Ireland on the night of a concert or a wedding when the young people were all elsewhere dancing or standing at the bar” (93).

As her life opens up slowly, Eilis becomes “brave and decisive” (118), whether with the customers in Bartocci’s or with Mrs. Kehoe and her lodgers. Thus, if she initially keeps her distance from Patty and Diana, who “cannot stop giving her advice, or making criticisms or comments” (60), once she starts going to the Friday evening dances run in the parish hall, she wishes she were “dressed like them, to be glamorous herself” (112), and later she even seeks their advice on clothes and make-up. Moreover, when Mrs. Kehoe asks Eilis to move into one of the rooms in the basement, “the best room in the house” (100), because
she is “the only one of them with any manners” (103), Eilis is grateful but also apprehensive, as she does not want Mrs. Kehoe to “become close to her or come to depend on her in any way” (103). Nor does she want to “cause bitterness and difficulty” between her and the other lodgers (104).

This inner conflict between American openness and Irish respectability manifests itself over succeeding chapters, surfacing during Eilis’s relationship with Tony, the Italian-American man she meets at one of the parish dances. Antonio Giuseppe Fiorello, as he introduces himself later, “did not seem Irish to her; he was too clean-cut and friendly and open in his gaze” (134). His job as a plumber does not make him any less attractive to Eilis either, which she makes clear in her letter to Rose, knowing that the latter would be prejudiced against someone like him by imagining him “to be somewhat rough and awkward and use bad grammar.” In Brooklyn, Eilis notices, “it was not always as easy to guess somebody’s character by their job as it was in Enniscorthy” (145-46).

Once Tony enters Eilis’s life, homesickness gives way to romantic wistfulness:

sometimes she actually believed that she was looking forward to thinking about home, letting images of home roam freely in her mind, but it came to her now with a jolt that, no, the feeling she had was only about Friday night and being collected from the house by a man she had met and going to the dance with him to the hall, knowing that he would be walking her back to Mrs. Kehoe’s afterwards. (137)

It now seems strange to her “that the mere sensation of savoring the prospect of something could make her think for a while that it must be the prospect of home” (137). Yet this very prospect remains a latent force in the action that prevents Eilis from immediately and wholeheartedly committing to Tony, whom she never mentions in her letters to her mother. Having been torn away from her moorings once, she is reluctant to put down new roots: “His saying that he loved her and his expecting a reply frightened her, made her feel that she would have to accept that
this was the only life she was going to have, a life spent away from home” (149). As Tony woos her tactfully and patiently, inviting her to family dinners, taking her out to movies, to a baseball game, or to the beach on Coney Island, Eilis finally returns his love and begins to embrace his vision of their future together and, implicitly, the American myth of promise to immigrants. For Tony and his family have actively seized the opportunities America affords, acquiring a piece of land on Long Island, where he and two of his brothers, one a mechanic, the other one a carpenter, plan to set up a building company (175). Tony’s ambition, coupled with Eilis’s own plans, which begin to take shape once she becomes a qualified bookkeeper, lifts her spirits, being “much more than she had imagined she would have when she arrived in Brooklyn first” (163).

All this is about to slip away from her, however, when Father Flood brings Eilis the terrible news of her sister’s sudden death from a bad heart. Rose knew about her condition but told no one about it and “went on as normal” (181), continuing to play golf. “Why did I ever come over here?” Eilis cannot help asking herself, unable to get over the shock of the news and to stop herself “breaking into hysterical sobbing” (180, 182). Rose’s death “changed everything Eilis thought about her time in Brooklyn, it made everything that had happened to her seem small” (184). Reading the letter in which Jack describes Rose’s funeral feels as though “he had come in from a hurling match and his team had lost and he was breathless with the news” (189). Eilis suspects that Tony, while deeply moved by the letter, is worried that Eilis might decide to return to Ireland for good. Eilis felt that “she was being held by someone wounded, that the letter had, somehow, in its tone, made clear to him what had really happened and made plain to him also that she belonged somewhere else, a place that he could never know. She thought that he was going to cry” and “felt almost guilty that she had handed some of her grief to him,” in “all its dark confusion” (192). The narrative energy of this scene stems from the mute and oblique
expression of the characters' feelings, as well as the conflicted
nature of these feelings, which Eilis appears to be projecting
onto Tony. Thus, it strikes Eilis that

Tony might feel she should go, that the letter had made him see where her
duty lay, that he was crying now for everything, for Rose who was dead, for
her mother who was lonely, for Eilis who would have to go, and for himself
who would be left. She wished she could say something clear, or even wished
that she could tell what he was thinking or why he was crying now harder
than she was. (193)

At a loss for words, Eilis and Tony comfort each other by making
love for the first time, surrendering themselves to the moment
as if it were their last: "He seemed lost to the world. And this
sense of him as beyond her made her want him more than she
had ever done, made her feel that this now and the memory
of it later would be enough for her and had made a difference
to her beyond anything she had ever imagined" (195). If guilt
over what they had done leads Eilis to suggest that they both go
to confession, shame keeps her from going to Father Flood "or
any priest that might recognize me" (197). But the way Father
Flood looks at her, or rather avoids her altogether, makes her
think that he knows more than he lets on, suggesting "it might be
hard for her mother not only losing Rose but having a daughter
who would take a man home to her room for the night" (201).
In the end, the duty to others takes precedence again over Ei-
ilis's own desires except that the object of her desires has now
changed, just as she herself has changed since she met Tony. As
a reaffirmation of her commitment, after she takes unpaid leave
from Bartocci's and passes her second-year exams, the last thing
Eilis does before she returns to Ireland is marry him.

Back in Enniscorthy, home appears to her both familiar and
different. Eilis feels "strange and guilty" because, despite "the
familiarity of these rooms that she had presumed she would be
happy and relieved" to walk into again, "on this first morning,
all she could do was count the days before she went back" (213).
Equally strange is her mother's "lack of interest in discussing
anything, any single detail, about her time in America” as though she took for granted that Eilis would never leave her side again (225). In her turn, Eilis does not bring up Tony nor does she confide in her friends, which makes her entire sojourn in America seem “a sort of fantasy” (226). Even Rose, whose grave she visits with her mom and whose presence she still feels at the table, seems more real to her now than Tony, whom she sometimes forgets to write. As in James Joyce’s short story “The Dead,” the ties that bind Eilis to the dead (her father and now her sister) are as powerful as those binding them to the living. If on her beach outings with Tony to Coney Island she was careful “not to swim too far out of her depth in this unfamiliar sea” (167), at home Eilis finds herself “basking in the ease of what [has] suddenly become familiarity”—the sea, the warm weather, and the company of Nancy, George, and even Jim Farrell—far away from Tony (226). The marine landscape figures as a “site of affective kinship” for Eilis, the medium through which she “renegotiates her relationship to home” (Harte 341). This shift in perspective shows not only that the seascape acts as a “catalyst for a Tóibín protagonist to perceive themselves, their society, and the world afresh” (Harte 347), but also the extent to which place, in general, “can assert itself, enfolding the visitor, staking its claim” (Schillinger). One such place is Blackwater village, on the way to Cush Gap, where Eilis and Rose, along with their brothers and parents, came when they were children; though tempted to share her vivid memories of this place with her friends, Eilis stops herself for she does “not want to sound like someone who had come back home after a long time away” (229).

Corresponding to the spatial division between the new world and the old world is then also a psychological one that makes Eilis feel “strangely, as though she were two people, one who had battled against two cold winters and many hard days in Brooklyn and fallen in love there, and the other who was her mother’s daughter, the Eilis whom everyone knew, or thought they knew” (226). It is this other Eilis that keeps putting off any
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“big decisions” in what she calls “an interlude” (226). For now, she decides to extend her stay for another week so that she can be in Nancy and George's wedding. In the meantime, she helps out in the accountant's office where Rose used to work, doing exactly what she “had been dreaming about” in Brooklyn (228). She reflects that as Tony’s wife she will be expected to stay at home doing domestic chores instead of continuing to work, as she would like to (228). The happiness promised by Tony then “shuts her off from other possibilities of happiness” (Hanks), which renders him another “pressure point” in Eilis’s life, an obstacle to rather than a catalyst for change.

To her surprise, the one pulling at her heart strings the most is no other than Jim Farrell, with his “easygoing presence,” natural tone in his voice, and “clear blue eyes”—the same eyes that two years before would not look at Eilis, presumably “because she came from a family that did not own anything in town,” but that now see her as glamorous and desirable (232, 234). The more time Eilis spends with Jim, the more remote Tony seems to her. “And not only that, but everything else that had happened in Brooklyn seemed as though it had almost dissolved and was no longer richly present for her” (240). Afraid to leave the renewed familiarity of home for “a life that seemed now an ordeal, with strange people, strange accents, strange streets” (241), Eilis wonders how Tony would react to her saying that “their marriage was a mistake. How easy would it be to divorce someone?” (245). Realizing that “nothing she could do would be right,” she sees “all three of them—Tony, Jim, her mother” as “pressure points” in her life, “figures whom she could only damage, [as] innocent people surrounded by light and clarity, and circling around them was herself, dark, uncertain” (246). It occurs to her that she no longer loves Tony, who seems to her like “part of a dream from which she had woken,” “a shadow at the edge of every moment of the day and night” (246). And yet Eilis knows that if she were in New York it would be Enniscorthy that seemed like a “strange, hazy dream” (261).
Indeed, words like “dream,” “shadow,” “haze,” and “mist” serve to suggest the doubts that beset Eilis as she evaluates her feelings for Tony, but the same words are used to describe the scene in which Eilis and Jim walk together on the strand right after Nancy and George’s wedding: “Although it was still warm, there was a strong haze, almost a mist over the sea” (249). Jim apologizes for his rudeness at the Sunday dance, attributing it to his fear of rejection after his girlfriend at the time had just broken off with him, and suggests they get engaged before Eilis returns to America. Her answer is in her silence that gives Jim even more false hopes, for as they begin to kiss, the mist becomes heavier (251). At the same time, Tóibín implies, in persisting to keep Tony’s existence secret from everyone and behaving as if she were Jim’s girlfriend, Eilis has played a risky, if not risqué, game with both men’s hearts. Her affective attachments have become sticky entanglements. Caught between different cultural spaces and torn by contradictory feelings, she is faced with a difficult choice—a choice that is now hers to make.

The novel builds to a heart-wrenching conclusion as Eilis finally breaks the silence and shares her secret with her mother, who appears surprisingly resigned to her daughter’s decision to go back to Brooklyn: “She almost wished her mother had been angry with her, or had even expressed disappointment” (259). It dawns on Eilis that her mother has known all along that Tony is “nice and kind and very special” from the letters Eilis had written to Rose and that have never been mentioned (259). After saying goodbye only once, her mother retreats to her room. She would not see her off in the morning. On the morning of her departure, Eilis leaves a note for Jim, whom she then imagines calling on her mother to discuss what he should do. Her mother would answer the door and look at him with eyes that suggested “both an inexpressible sorrow and whatever pride she could muster.” “She has gone back to Brooklyn,” her mother would say, and on her way to Cork, Eilis “imagined the years ahead, when these words would come to mean less and
less to the man who heard them and would come to mean more and more to herself" (262).

Whereas in most immigrant fictions "the immigrant must deal with prejudice and homesickness but eventually becomes empowered by a new American identity" (Cowart 7), Brooklyn leaves us with the sense that Eilis will never overcome homesickness and that her American identity will remain intimately bound up with her Irish one. Throughout, in fact, Tóibín’s deeply affecting novel foregrounds the ties that bind Eilis to her native land, "the stuff that won’t go away"—to use the title of Tóibín’s conversation with Eugenides—that will continue to haunt her because it is so resonant with meaning, however bittersweet.

WORKS CITED


