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Narration as Conversation: Patterns of Community-making in Colm Tóibín's *The Empty Family*

Catherine Conan

Literature in many of its branches is no other
than the shadow of good talk.

R.L. Stevenson, "Talk and Talkers (I)"

- 1 Much discussion of Tóibín's fiction centers around the question of exactly how revisionist it is, with his oft-quoted review of Foster's *Paddy and Mr Punch*¹ laying out the terms of the debate² between revisionism and (neo-) nationalism,³ or de- and re-territorialization (Ryan) in his fiction. His texts are the space where the conflict between the aspirations of a younger, liberal generation to freedom from the constraints of a conservative and religious nation and a sense of rootedness, or homesickness, is played out. The search for identity, whether in the form of home or nation, is carried out via an interaction between the individual and the physical environment of Ireland (Redmond swimming with his grandson or the erosion of the coast in *The Heather Blazing*) or a reflection on the intertwining of personal and national history (Redmond, again in *The Heather Blazing*). However, I would like to argue here, with the illustration of Colm Tóibín's latest collection of short stories *The Empty Family*, that a sense of communal identity is equally gained by interaction with others in the form of intradiegetic conversation or through the act of writing itself. The practice of linguistic exchanges according to rules that bind participants together defines a set of *commonplaces* around which a feeling of community can be created. The fact that the stories were written while Tóibín worked as a visiting writer at Stanford and the University of Texas at Austin (Wiesenfarth 2) creates a distance as the texts both reach out for and create an Ireland of the mind. Ireland stands out more sharply from a distance, as the Irish tourists in JFK in "One Minus One," the story that opens the collection, look wrong. The narrator, imagining the easy, reassuring conversation he could have with them, recognizes that verbal interaction creates a familiar space away from home and encourages reflection on what exactly "home" is (Tóibín, *Empty Family*

4-5). This article will take a look at two different types of dialogue between characters, then at narrative communication, and finally argue that “good talk” provides the ethics of Tóibín’s stories in *The Empty Family*.

Conversation in *The Empty Family*

- 2 Conversation and its accompanying rituals, often involving food or drink, play an important part in *The Empty Family*. Classic sociology has established the links between food and talk. For Georg Simmel in “Sociology of the Meal,” “the sociological structure of the meal [...] links precisely the exclusive selfishness of eating with a frequency of being together,” and this “gives rise to the primitive notion that one is thereby creating common flesh and blood” (Frisby and Featherstone 130-131). Community is also at the root of the word “communication.” Shared words and gestures create a sense of home, but they can also be the field where dissensions are played out. Pragmatic linguistics has provided a framework within which to analyse everyday conversations in terms of illocutionary acts and practical communication goals, inasmuch as

In everyday conversation we do not merely want to represent facts with linguistic means, nor do we merely want to provide our conversation partners with information, we have additional purposes... viz. illocutionary actions, with which we want to influence the possible actions of the hearer. (Van Dijk 142)

- 3 Another theoretical tool is Conversation Analysis, which studies “the particular strategies conversationalists use for achieving the meaning that they desire within the particular context of interaction” (Woodilla 36), paying attention to who opens or ends a conversation, how turns are taken and how the conversation progresses, has developed a specific methodology and standardized transcripts to make sense of ordinary conversation. By contrast, literary dialogues, characterized by linearity, cannot as readily represent silences or several participants speaking at the same time. Nevertheless, both conversation analysis and pragmatic linguistics help the reader make sense of the construction of meaning by participants in a conversation.
- 4 However, by assuming that speakers want to “influence the possible actions of the hearer,” pragmatic linguistics considers only one possible meaning of communication: exchange. Alain Milon in *L’Art de la conversation* reminds his reader that *munus*, the Latin root of the word “communication,” can imply either utilitarian exchange or sharing, which suggests a sense of community (21). He then proceeds to make a distinction between communication, especially in the modern sense, which emphasizes exchange—and conversation, whose Kantian “finality without end” is the creation of a properly human communal space.⁴ Thus the distinction made by Milon between cold-hearted communication and convivial conversation is not far from that articulated by communicational critic Roger D. Sell between coercive and non-coercive, or genuine communication. The former is that “where one communicant is thought of as sending a message to the other, who interprets it in the light of a context that is also implied by the sender” and the latter where “the parties think of each other more as human equals, and are basically comparing notes about something as seen from their different points of view” (Introduction 3-4). Studying how some conversations between characters of *The Empty Family* negotiate their way between the two poles of the ideal Kantian conversation and a Bourdieusian vision of linguistic exchanges as occasions of

wielding symbolic power (Bourdieu 14) will hopefully trace the contours of their conversational habitat, or home.

- 5 The idea of talking as the exchange of words for money or status is present in *The Empty Family* through various motifs such as Malik's phone conversations in "The Street," where spoken words have an actual price: "The phone call cost him less than five euros if he stayed on for under three minutes" (161). Malik then moves on from his job as a sweeper in the barber shop to another selling phone cards and mobile phones, whose value as objects is not so much that promised by their original purpose as the status—or symbolic power—that they convey to their destitute owners: "these men away from home would never have enough money for a car or a truck or a house. This small object so filled with modern tricks had come to stand in for all of that" (171). As they also are "one of the subjects for easy discussion" (171), mobile phones provide conversation starters, thus strengthening bonds with the other emigrants as well as the folks back at home, at the price of closing upon their fragile community a self-referential loop (talking about technologies that enable talking).

Conversation as Competition in "The Pearl Fishers"

- 6 In "The Pearl Fishers," talking is very much a competitive activity whose aim is to prevail upon other participants or to get them to act in a certain way. This is suggested when it becomes apparent that the three main characters in the story met through school debates, i.e. archetypes of coercive communication, with strict rules and an avowedly competitive purpose. One of the characters, Gráinne Roche, was then renowned for "a skill at insulting her opponents that thrilled the audience" (*Empty Family* 68). Her talent for coercive communication does not desert her years later as the dinner invitation that she sends to the narrator is really a simulacrum of a convivial occasion. Indeed, her intention is to persuade him to allow her to reproduce a poem he wrote when they were at school together. She is planning to use it in a book that she has written to denounce her sexual abuse at the hands of a priest in that school. The narrator too tends to use other people for his own ends, with an attitude of social and sexual consumption: "[he does] not see anyone [he has] no desire to see," seeks "sex with no strings attached" (63) and confesses that "[he lets] no one irritate [him] unless [he] can expect in return some compensation such as sex or serious amusement" (64). While he was in the toilet, Gráinne and her husband Donnacha have been joined by another man:

I tapped him on the shoulder.

"Get up," I said.

He turned and grinned.

"I now declare this meeting of the Catholic cranks of Ireland suspended," I said. "Go back to your own table."

"What are you doing together?" he asked. "How do you know each other?"

"We are the only two people who have read your book *Reading the Bible with Bono*, and we often meet to discuss it," I replied.

"OK," he said. "Wexford. I get it. The Wexford mafia."

"Our aim," Donnacha said, "is to rule all Ireland."

"Wash your hair," I said to Seamus Fox. "It's too long and too greasy."

"Fuck off."

"Here now," Donnacha interrupted.

"If the bishops heard that," I said.

"You can take them out of Wexford," he said, "but you can't take Wexford out of them."

"Tell me something," I asked.

"What is it now?"

"Is the Church still against fornication? Or has it gone the way of Limbo and the burning of heretics?"

"Fuck off."

"What is the current thinking on wankers?" I asked.

Seamus Fox stood up and grinned and then sullenly turned and walked back to his table.

"How to make friends and influence people," Donnacha said.

"Hey, it worked," I said. "He's gone." (85-86)

- 7 It is apparent from the conclusion of this exchange that it was conducted with a specific pragmatic aim on the part of the narrator ("it worked") and that this aim was paradoxically not the creation or strengthening of an interpersonal bond but on the contrary its severance ("he's gone"). Although this has all the evident features of an ordinary conversation (it has a beginning, an end, and participants talk in turns), the two main participants systematically refuse to take into consideration the implications of the previous utterance so that the flow of the conversation is never established as the two speakers fight for control. Harvey Sacks' classic studies in the working of conversations has established that they work in adjacency pairs, such as invitation/response, request/acceptance or refusal, and that conversations show a preference for agreement over disagreement (Hutchby and Woofit 42). However, the progression of the present conversation between the narrator and Seamus Fox never takes the path of least resistance: a statement whose illocutionary force is clearly an order ("go back to your own table") is not followed by compliance or refusal but by a question ("what are you doing together?") A pair that actually works, such as "Tell me something"/"What is it now?," where the pronoun "it" clearly refers to the "something" in the previous utterance, signals the defeat of Fox, the second speaker, who will leave the scene soon afterwards. Fox loses because he makes all the wrong moves in this game, such as playing second speaker. Refusing to engage ("Fuck off") and to frontally address the narrator, using the third person plural pronoun ("you can take them out...") instead of the second are other mistakes that lead to his leaving the ground.
- 8 On some level the conversation works, even as competition rather than cooperation, because speakers understand each other's sentences in their deviation from the expected norm, or in other words their conversational implicature (Short 244). The narrator softens the aggressive request that Fox leave with the mock-performative tone of "I now declare...," which gives a humorous edge to the insult ("Catholic crank"). His sidestepping answer to Fox's question about how they met is still correctly interpreted via a system of shared knowledge and assumptions. "We are the only two people who have read your book *Reading the Bible with Bono*" is rightly understood by Fox as an attack on what the narrator sees as an attempt to re-package Catholicism in an age of mass consumption. Fox then probably places him as Gráinne's vocally anti-Catholic Wexford acquaintance, although this is left to the reader's interpretation.
- 9 Thus, on another level this is a contest not only for discursive and physical space (the attention of Gráinne and Donnacha and the table laid for three people), but also for an ideological representation of Ireland. The narrator undermines Fox by associating him with a religious institution that traditionally buttressed the authority of the Irish state but that came under attack as a result of accusations of sexual abuse, which are the

central theme of “The Pearl Fishers,” and a general modernization of Irish society, which the narrator’s openly gay lifestyle exemplifies. The narrator mocks the inconsistencies of both the Catholic Church (“what is the current thinking” implies that doctrine has more to do with fashion than morality) and Fox himself, who is driven by him to swear (“If the bishops heard that”). By contrast, Fox associates the narrator with a local entity, county Wexford and Enniscorthy, where the narrator grew up, and which according to Tóibín are inextricably linked with the history of Irish rebellions (O’Toole 183-185).

- 10 Two political visions of Ireland are opposed here, and the heated argument is a fictional device that enables Tóibín to present a dynamic vision of the contradictions that plague the contemporary Irish Catholic Church. Even though the narrator wins this contest, the argument is not wholly resolved in his favour. Donnacha’s ironic comment at the end and the silent presence of Gráinne throughout, suggest that the narrator’s attitude is divisive rather than constructive of meaningful social relations.

Conversation as Cooperation in “Two Women”

- 11 At the other end of the spectrum of interpersonal relationships, more “sharing” than “exchange,” the conversation between Frances and Rachael in “Two Women” creates a meaningful bond between them. Both are elderly women who decades before were involved with the same man, Irish actor Luke Freaney, with Frances as his mistress and Rachael, once they had split, as his wife. The two women meet for the first time at the end of the story in a Wicklow pub that Frances is dressing as a set for the shooting of a film. A pub, significantly situated not in Dublin but in rural Wicklow, in itself represents an authentic kind of sociability that the story shows as no more than nostalgic fantasy, as evidenced by the fact that this particular pub is going to be turned into a simulacrum of itself⁵—and by the distinctly unfriendly attitude of the owner. Frances, instead of creating a pub from scratch in a studio, has to dress a real one, a task which is much more difficult:

But [the director] was not old enough to know that you got nothing extra from using a real pub, no matter how quaint and full of atmosphere, instead of a studio-built pub. A set, she knew, just needed a few spare props that suggested something; with a real pub you would have to spend hours removing objects that suggested too much, and painting over colours that seemed faded to the eye but would jar once bright lights and a camera were shone on them. (*Empty Family* 40)

- 12 Besides the obvious metafictional value of this comment,⁶ the suggestion here is of an analogy between Frances’ aesthetically creative task of re-arranging the pub as a film set and the process of remembering her time with Luke. The same idea of a few props being sufficient to evoke a rich reality, and a similar parallel between art and the workings of memory, is present in the scene where Frances visits the National Gallery. As the French manner, with bold colours, of some Irish artists creates a truer (i.e. aesthetically richer) picture of Irish landscapes (44), so “the lightness in the walk, and the way of speaking” of a porter at the museum suddenly reminds her of Luke, even though his “face did not look at all like Luke Freaney’s face” (45). What is at stake here for Frances is an elusive essence of Irishness (“Perhaps, she thought, it was Irish, but he had brought it to a fine art and used it as a mask and made it into pure charm” [45]) glimpsed at through the memory of love or a successful work of art. Her hard work

arranging for the film is both a preparation for, and a symbol of, her finally making sense of her time with Luke.

- 13 This will be carried out through her conversation with his widow, which concludes the story and constitutes a moment of authentic interpersonal connectedness, what Ciaran Carson would call in the context of music session (held in a pub, as it happens), “crack, or social exchange” (71). Although Frances initially wants to get the intruders out—as the narrator of “the Pearl Fishers” with Seamus Fox—because they are going to shoot the film, when her assistant tells her who the woman is Frances puts on make-up and walks up to her:

“Rachael,” she said, “I’m Francie.”

What she saw when the woman looked up at her was veiled sorrow and then a smile with even more sadness in it than her first look.

“Oh God! I didn’t have any idea.”

“I know. We never met before, did we?”

“He talked about you,” Rachael said and stood up awkwardly to shake her hand. Her accent was English.

“He talked about you,” Rachael repeated.

“I didn’t know it was you,” Frances said, “until Gabi told me just now.”

“I thought you lived...”

“I do, Rachael. I’m just working here.”

“I hope we’re not getting in the way.”

“Don’t worry at all.”

“Can you sit down and talk with us for a moment?” Rachael asked.

“I can, of course, Rachael.”

Rachael introduced Frances to her companion.

“She was with Luke before me,” she said, and once again her smile had a terrible sadness in it, but there was something elegant about her too, almost beautiful.

“This woman was the love of his life,” Rachael said to her companion and then smiled again at Frances.

“He was lucky with both of us, wasn’t he?” Frances asked.

“He was the love of my life,” Rachael said. “I can say that.”

In her voice and in her face Frances could see how kind she was, and how good she must have been with him.

“He loved this pub,” Rachael continued. “He knew Miley, the owner, for years.”

“I never knew that,” Frances said. “You know, we were never in Ireland together, never once.”

“I did know that. He talked a lot about you, especially when he got sick, but other times too. He was happy out of Ireland. It was just a few funny places he missed.”

(60-61)

- 14 The contrast between this conversation and the one from “The Pearl Fishers” is obvious. This passage shows cooperation rather than competition between the two women. Their talk is arranged into functioning adjacency pairs, such as “I hope we’re not getting in the way”/“Don’t worry at all” or “Can you sit down...”/“I can, of course, Rachael.” Frances introduces herself as “Francie,” thus sparking a feeling of intimacy and shared history which is denied the reader, for whom she is “Frances” throughout the preceding narrative. Frances also uses the other woman’s first name, showing her willingness to accept her for who she really is. This is to be contrasted with the practice of the narrator in “The Pearl Fishers” who resorts to insult (“Catholic cranks”) and irony (“*Reading the Bible with Bono*”) to refer to his interlocutor. Frances also probably uses Rachael’s first name to control her in this space which, while they are dressing the set, is hers—and which, as we have seen, symbolically stands for her memory process. Frances’ attempt at being in control of the conversation is also apparent in her decision

to apply makeup before confronting Rachael, and in her interruption of the other woman's question ("I thought you lived..." / "I do, Rachael"). However, this should not be seen as an aggressive fight for territory but rather as indicating how much is at stake in this conversation, at least from Frances' perspective, which is what the internal focalisation gives the reader access to.

- 15 The aim of this conversation for both women is to understand how they stand in relation to each other and to their time with the same man. Both women use very simple, essential terms to describe a situation whose essence is expressed by Rachael ("This woman was the love of his life... He was the love of my life"), Frances' interruption representing an attempt at mitigating its bare, after all banal, sadness. Their attention to each other is made evident by their frequent use of the pronoun "you," and the predominance of verbs indicating cognition and communication (think, know, hope, talk) suggest that the phatic function is of paramount importance here, if not the *raison d'être* of their talk. This is an exchange in which information provided by Rachael (Frances says "I didn't know," "I never knew") and the confession of Luke's love for her make up, albeit belatedly, for the lack of social recognition that she suffered as a result of her illegitimate position. Although Rachael had her picture in the gossip magazines when she married Luke, Frances could not even attend his funeral (52). In a sense therefore, his conversation fulfills the same function as Lady Gregory in "Silence" giving her poems to her lover to publish under his name as dramatic monologues, because "the fact that it was not known and publicly understood that she was with him hurt her profoundly, made her experience what existed between them as a kind of emptiness or absence" (*Empty Family* 22). Telling the anecdote to Henry James, even in a distorted form, so that he will make a story out of it, is also a way for her to gain public recognition.
- 16 Once more, as in "The Pearl Fishers," Ireland has a special symbolic function in the conversation. The fact that Frances was unaware of the special link between Luke and the pub where they are sitting suggests that "Ireland" stands for what Frances missed in the relationship, a special kind of intimacy that comes with the married status. Rachael does perceive this implicit significance of Ireland, as her answer to "we were never in Ireland together" is, apparently illogically, "He talked a lot about you," a way of assuring her that she mattered to Luke all the same. Thus the pub that Frances was stripping down really is a "funny place": it acquires real value and significance as a place of community via a linguistic exchange that enables her to come to terms with her past. This could be Tóibín's post-revisionist way of suggesting that a sense of togetherness and shared identity is possible through the practice of genuine, ethical conversation, even after the globalization and subsequent re-packaging of Irishness.

Narrative Communication in "One Minus One"

- 17 The metafictional parallel between conversation and poetry or fiction as ways of granting social recognition to those who are denied it suggests that the good conversation could provide a blueprint for the ethics of Tóibín's fiction. The difficulty here is that, just as conversation in fiction between characters differs from natural conversation (in that it is written not spoken, made to be overheard by readers and arranged by the narrator), narrative communication between the narrator and a narratee who may be dead or absent has different rules from intradiegetic

conversation. On yet another level, the notion of literary communication across narrative planes, i.e. between implied author and reader, calls for a redefinition, and perhaps a restriction, of the idea of communication. Indeed, according to Monika Fludernik:

The implied author 'communicates' only in so far as the actual reader *when reading* (i.e. as Nünning's 'empirical reader') constructs the meaning and values of the textual whole from all textual levels of utterance and story content [...] In as much as the (real) reader may hold moral or political opinions inimical to the text's value systems, s/he needs to suspend his or her real-life beliefs in order to enter into a co-operative reading experience (Warhol 1989). (*Fictions* 446)

- 18 While Fludernik is interested in narrative communication between narrator and narratee and is rather dismissive of the idea of a communication between implied authors and implied readers, other authors like R. D. Sell study precisely this "suspension of real-life beliefs" that enable texts to function as spaces of dialogue and cooperation between (implied) authors and readers. My aim in this section will be to study both levels of communication (narrative and literary) in relation to Tóibín's stories.
- 19 In *The Empty Family*, two crucial stories are addressed to a second-person narratee: one is the opening story of the collection, "One minus One," and the other is the one who gives its title to the book. The presence of the pronoun "you" inevitably draws the narrative towards the conversational form, even though interaction is made impossible by the absence of the narratee. Rather, these stories are conversational in the sense that they are stand-ins for an impossible conversation between narrator and narratee. To put it differently, their narrative form is a poignant reminder of the impossibility of direct interaction. Fludernik and DelConte after her have shown that second-person narratives cover a variety of situations of narrative communication, according to whether narrator, protagonist and narratee are one and the same, or exist on different diegetic levels (for instance, the you-protagonist in Butor's *La Modification* is very different from that in Calvino's *If On a Winter's Night a Traveler* because the latter has a first-person narrator whereas the former does not).⁷ Similarly, second-person narratives are not merely indicators of metafictional intent, or revelators of the fictional nature of fiction, but each in its specificity makes a particular aesthetic, emotional or political point (Fludernik, "Second-Person").
- 20 "One Minus One" is told in the present tense by a homodiegetic narrator, an Irish academic who lives and works in the United States, with flashbacks in the past tense that narrate his mother's death and funeral, which the narratee attended. In the present of the narration, narrator and addressee are separated by three kinds of distance: spatial (one is in Ireland, the other in the US), temporal (because of the time lag, "Ireland is six hours away" [*Empty Family* 1]) and linguistic/communicational (for several complex reasons that the narrative hints at, he can't or won't phone). Thus the text of the short story represents the narrator's attempt at establishing communication with his narratee across these three distances. Stylistically speaking, he does this while simultaneously keeping in view the huge gap between him and his addressee by using a form of preterition:

If I called you now, it would be half two in the morning; I could wake you up. If I called, I could go over everything that happened six years ago. Because that is what is on my mind tonight, as though no time had elapsed, as though the strength of the moonlight had by some fierce magic chosen tonight to carry me back to the last real thing that happened to me. On the phone to you across the Atlantic, I could go

over the days surrounding my mother's funeral. I could go over the details as though I were in danger of forgetting them. (*Empty Family* 1)

- 21 The use of the conditional is a clear indicator of the fact that the narrative here is the replacement of a conversation that cannot take place, both imagined and denied by the written words. The repeated use of the subordinating conjunction "as though," both comparative and concessive, also establishes this distance between reality and the world of fears and fantasy. The prevalence of this expression has been noted by Edward A. Hagan, who associates it with the fiction of "marginalized groups" such as homosexuals or (post-)colonial societies (32-33), as a device to mark the distance between their experience and "the ordinary consensus about reality" (32). While I cannot but accept the statistical evidence collected by Hagan about the frequency of the expression in "marginalized" writers, the feelings of emotional separation expressed by the distance posited by the comparative/concessive "as though" are certainly universal. Incidentally, Fludernik has claimed that the use of a second-person addressee within a gay narrative can serve to withhold their gender until the end of the story and thereby show as universal (because they are shared by the deluded reader), and thus acceptable, feelings of homosexual love and affection. However, in the case of "One Minus One," the reader is left in no doubt about the gender of the narratee in the first page, because he "wore a suit and a tie at the funeral" (1). Then in the next paragraph, the whispered implications of a homosexual affair are made clear: "she used the word 'friend' with a sweet, insinuating emphasis" (2).
- 22 All in all, the reader gains very little knowledge about who the narratee is, apart from the fact that he is a former lover of the narrator and that their affair was over even before the mother died. The story is wholly about the narrator's feelings of guilt and inadequacy while his mother was dying, because he stayed out of touch with his sister while the mother was ill, and because he failed to communicate with her while she lay on her death bed. In this story, the narratee is almost a pure function, that of an intradiegetic audience. His homosexuality and sentimental involvement with the narrator are his only defining characteristics. The second-person pronoun in a narrative has a necessary extradiegetic pull, drawing the reader inside the story all the more so as the intradiegetic addressee is devoid of specific traits (hence it is easier to identify with the "you" of a guidebook than with the protagonist of *La Modification*). Here the blandness of the addressee facilitates identification by the real reader, potentially holding "moral or political opinions inimical to the text's value systems" (Fludernik, *Fictions* 438) and thus validates this gay narrative as an expression of universal feelings.
- 23 In the case of "One Minus One," this feeling is the guilt at having turned one's back on elemental family ties in the search of freedom and self-fulfillment, here an academic career in the United States. It is not exclusively linked to the gay experience, as it is very similar to what Nuria, the protagonist of "the New Spain," is made to feel by her family when she returns to the family holiday home on Menorca after years spent in London. The function of the apostrophic mode in the first-person narrative of "One Minus One" is that it "supplies a motivation for the narrational act" (Fludernik, "Second-Person"). Don Bialostosky analyses the otherwise puzzling address by the narrator to a "dear brother Jim" in the first line of Wordsworth's "We are Seven" as a device "that conceals his vulnerability and enables him to continue [...] his appeal to his brother implicates him in the human bonds he wishes to sever" (241). This analysis also applies to Tóibín's story, where the function of the "you" is to restore within the

narrative the human bonds that the narrator had severed by going incommunicado while his mother was dying in Ireland, and thus alleviate his guilt.

- 24 Finally, the “you” stands in a clear triadic relationship with the mother and the country: “My mother is six years dead tonight, Ireland is six hours away and you are asleep” (*Empty Family* 1, my emphasis). This is the first mention of the second person pronoun. Rather than the mother/country dyad that Kathleen Costello-Sullivan posits, one could see the problematics of home in Tóibín’s work as mother/country/other. The apostrophic narrative as a fundamental tool for what Matthew Ryan calls “reterritorialization” in Tóibín’s work. Indeed, Ryan considers that textual relations offer political models:

The novels offer examples of how the nation ‘should be’ and how the individual should inhabit it. The novel itself becomes the material mediation of the highly abstracted sociality of this form of life; it functions in much the same way as ‘sovereign and limited territory’ does for the imagined community of the nation.
(20)

- 25 While Ryan is here concerned with the novel form, one could argue that stories also, through their pattern of narrative communication, offer a model of social relationships within the territory of the text. This homodiegetic story in the apostrophic mode and in the present tense constitutes an example of what Russian formalists called “skaz,” or “a written (literary) imitation of a discourse [...] occurring within what is formally describable as a communication framework” (Banfield 172). Thus the focus in “One Minus One” is, through the choice of the narrative communication framework, on the severance and restoration of the bond with the organic community represented by “mother” and “Ireland,” inasmuch as, for Ann Banfield, “through the *skaz* form a literate culture reflects on and distances itself from an oral folk tradition” (172).

Literature as Dialogue in “The New Spain”

- 26 The last question is whether in *The Empty Family* the construction of meaning by the reader constitutes an example of “genuine” literary communication, this being defined as the ability to establish cooperation with a variety of readers with different ideological convictions, and by exercising a Keatsian negative capability, which “is the main psychological and ethical precondition for any genuine communication—for any uncoercive community-making—at all/Great writers’ negative capability makes critical discussion of their “meaning” problematic. After all, a “meaning” is thought of as a something that is communicated” (Sell, *Communicational* 37).
- 27 This vast question would deserve more than the space of these concluding remarks, but I will try to provide some tentative answers via a reading of a passage from “The New Spain.” Some stories like “Barcelona, 1975,” especially the sex scenes, read too often as self-indulgence on the part of the homosexual narrator, and probably also of the author, given the strong autobiographical strain in this particular story.⁸ On the contrary, in “The New Spain” the narrator manages to withdraw and to let a political issue stand—at least partially—unresolved. The main character is “the rather annoying Carme” in the words of the *Daily Telegraph* reviewer (Miller), who criticizes her hypocrisy as a former Socialist who comes back to the homeland to take possession of her inheritance, the house her grandmother has left her. After eight years in London (“in exile” writes Thomas Jones, the *Guardian* reviewer), Carme finds Menorca much

changed, to the point of losing her way to the family house. She realizes that the island has opened itself to tourism and that her family has shared in the economic benefits that the process has brought (the father rents holiday cottages that he built on the land), which enabled them to build a swimming pool in lieu of the olive grove in the garden. However, according to her grandmother's will, the house is hers and her sister's, not her parents'. In a climactic scene, she disparages the changes that were introduced by her father, thus highlighting his ideological contradictions: 'He has grown fat selling our property to tourists and now he has the nerve to complain about them spoiling things!' (108). This reveals how the parents, by wanting to make profit, have alienated themselves from the conviviality of the island's festival, which according to them is "too full of outsiders and tourists now" (107). However, Carme's criticism is turned against her by her mother, who accuses her of being the ultimate reason why her grandmother sold her property ("Do you know why your grandmother sold the land?" her mother asked. "So she would have enough cash in the bank to send you every month" [108]) and neglecting family ties in her selfishness: "Every stitch you're wearing was paid for by the poor old lady,' her mother said. 'And you phoned once a year, that is what she got in return. And you come back just in time to claim your inheritance'" (109).

- 28 All participants in the argument emerge as full of weaknesses and contradictions that the text does not try to solve, thus creating a space for dialogism within the story. Even the father, who wants to preserve the peace, does so only because he needs his daughter's signature, as the owner of the land, to sell the houses he built on it. Given Tóibín's involvement with Socialists in 1970s Barcelona (*Homage* 28), it is not surprising (but neither is it necessary) that his story should adopt Carme's point of view rather than her parents' (Carme is the focalizer throughout this third-person narrative). However, Tóibín's narrator acknowledges that the mother's accusation hits home because it is justified and does not try to solve the protagonist's ideological contradictions: by settling into her grandmother's house, she accepts the privilege of inherited private property even as she strengthens her bond with the deceased's memory. Thus it becomes easy for a review in the *Daily Telegraph* to portray her as a spoiled hypocrite ("So much for Socialism" [Miller]) while the *Guardian* reviewer chooses to emphasize her "exile" and her "regret" at not having phoned her grandmother (Jones). The lack of narratorial intervention in the dialogue and the fact that all characters are blamable, even to different degrees, are examples of successful, non-coercive literary communication. The text thus accommodates diverse opinions on the readers' parts and different readings, as the two reviews show.

- 29 This article has looked in turn at the three levels at which participants in the literary process communicate: dialogue between characters, narrative communication between narrator and narratee, and literary communication between (implied) author and reader in *The Empty Family*. Just as in real-life exchanges, communication within a literary text can be coercive or non-coercive, in the spirit of competition or cooperation, exchanging or sharing. At each level, what is at stake in Tóibín's texts is the possibility of Ireland as a functioning, reterritorialised community. Visions of Ireland as home are at the bottom of characters' arguments or friendly talks, of narrative addresses to a narratee, and of how Tóibín's texts communicate with its

readers insofar as the practice of literary communication mediates within the text the kind of social bonds that its ideological subtext views as desirable. This would tend to revive the notion of reading as encounter and to rekindle interest in “the types of friendship or companionship a book provides as it is read” (Booth 170). Conversation understood as a socially binding ritual, carried out through the linguistic medium and with respect and attention for another who is the end and not the means of it, provides the ethical blueprint for literary discussion of “home” in his works. Tóibín’s answer about the ideal type of community that “Ireland”—as a geographical entity, as a web of social relations and cultural representations—thus lies in the various acts of conversation within his work, not in their outcome.

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NOTES

1. See for instance Costello-Sullivan 89.

2. "Foster's position is clear: he wants Ireland to become a pluralist, post-nationalist, non-sectarian place. So do I. But there are other (I hesitate to say "atavistic") forces operating within me too that I must be conscious of" (Tóibín, "New Ways" 6).
3. For a discussion of nationalism and neo-nationalism in Tóibín's fiction, see Ledwidge.
4. "Ainsi, la conversation, quand elle est bien menée, ce qui ne veut pas dire qu'elle doit nécessairement aboutir à une fin, à une prise de position ou à un accord, permet de réaliser d'un point de vue pragmatique, un lieu de vie où l'esprit communautaire trouverait ses fondements dans la cohérence d'un acte vertueux, autrement dit pour reprendre l'expression de Kant, dans la véritable humanité, lieu d'un jeu que les hommes doivent préserver" (Milon 24).
5. According to Roy Foster, Irish pubs are already simulacra, where "supposedly totemic objects are stacked up haphazardly in a homage to history as bricolage, summoning up a nostalgia for something that never was" (156). Although this phenomenon used to be confined to Irish pubs abroad, "they are starting to appear in Ireland as well" (256).
6. An interesting parallel could be drawn with the way in which Tóibín describes foreign cities, especially in his travel writings. In *The Sign of the Cross* for instance, Seville as décor is vividly represented through a few salient elements, such as the Basilica or an "L-shaped bar in the Barrio de Santa Cruz" (38) while the depth of the description is given by the shouted words and recollections of the inhabitants.
7. For a very handy chart that summarizes these distinctions, see DelConte 211. "One Minus One" and "The Empty Family" belong to the third category (out of five), where there is "a coincidence of narrator and protagonist functions but a distinct narratee; in these narrative, most commonly simultaneous present-tense, a narrator speaks about him/herself to someone else" (DelConte 212).
8. Like his narrator, Tóibín arrived in Barcelona in 1975 with no Spanish or Catalan. His naive but sexually enthusiastic Irish protagonist could easily be seen as a post-1993 (when homosexuality was decriminalized in Ireland) version of the coy Tóibín who in 1976 saw a transvestite prostitute in a bar for the first time, which "came as a bit of a shock" (Tóibín, *Homage* 167).

ABSTRACTS

Cet article se propose d'étudier le fonctionnement des conversations dans le dernier recueil de nouvelles de Colm Tóibín, *The Empty Family*, et leur importance dans la définition, ou la création, d'un sentiment d'identité collective. Considérant que ce sentiment d'appartenance est construit non seulement par l'interaction entre l'individu et son environnement, mais aussi à travers la sociabilité conversationnelle, on examinera tout d'abord les conversations entre personnages, au niveau intra-diégétique. Celles-ci, qui peuvent être coercives ou non, fondées sur l'échange ou le partage, la compétition ou la coopération, articulent les tensions qui traversent l'Irlande contemporaine en tant que communauté. On se demandera finalement dans quelle mesure la conversation, cette fois entre plans narratologiques différents, entre narrateur et narrataire ou entre texte ou auteur (implicite) et lecteur fournit au texte de Tóibín sa structure éthique, et donc réalise au niveau de ses relations textuelles le modèle de communauté désiré par son inconscient politique.

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