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Recessive Action in Colm Tóibín's *Brooklyn*

ABSTRACT

Colm Tóibín's 2009 novel *Brooklyn* accompanies Eilis Lacey, a native of Enniscorthy, Ireland of the 1950s on a reluctant voyage across the Atlantic. Her passage reconstructs a common experience of immigration and exile to New York for the Irish working class seeking to escape the lack of prospects in small-town Ireland after the Second World War. Caught as she is between two homes—the traditional Irish culture she emerges from and the new capitalist society of America to which she emigrates—Eilis is placed in a polemical relationship to the public sphere, staked on multiple grounds of in-betweenness: she is a woman, Irish, and an exile. Belonging, for her, is posited on a complex understanding of the tensions between national and transnational identities. Eilis's parochialism, at first, and cosmopolitanism, later on, are both decisive characteristics that become driving forces behind her social integration and marriage prospects. She is initially barred from promising job and marriage opportunities due to her naivety and lack of sophistication. As an Irish female immigrant, Eilis becomes in the course of the novel a cosmopolitan from the margins, one of the newly uprooted, and ultimately a split self.

Keywords: Colm Tóibín, *Brooklyn*, immigration, detachment, minimal realization.

Colm Tóibín's 2009 novel *Brooklyn* accompanies Eilis Lacey, a native of Enniscorthy, Ireland of the 1950s on a reluctant voyage across the Atlantic. Her passage reconstructs a common experience of immigration and exile to New York for the Irish working class seeking to escape the lack of prospects in small-town Ireland after the Second World War. Caught as she is between two homes—the traditional Irish culture she emerges from and the new capitalist society of America to which she emigrates—Eilis is placed in a polemical relationship to the public sphere, staked on multiple grounds of in-betweenness: she is a woman, Irish, and an exile. Belonging, for her, is posited on a complex understanding of the tensions between national and transnational identities. Eilis's parochialism, at first, and cosmopolitanism, later on, are both decisive characteristics that become driving forces behind her social integration and marriage prospects. She is initially barred from promising job and marriage opportunities due to her naivety and lack of sophistication. As an Irish female immigrant, Eilis becomes in the course of the novel a cosmopolitan from the margins, one of the newly uprooted, and ultimately a split self.

Much has been made of Eilis's detachment and downright passivity and paralysis, and critics have explored the connection between her passivity and her immigration status. Tory Young diagnoses Eilis's "watchful remove from action," the feeling of "being distanced from not only one's surroundings but oneself" (131) as owing to depression. Narratively, the style of the novel enacts this condition in what Young describes as a "narrative report": "the reader is privy to Eilis's feelings and is often tormented by her inability to voice them" (131).

In what follows I would like to describe Eilis as trapped in a different in-between space than that of immigration. Rather, she is trapped between two different discourses: the Romantic and the realist one. On the one hand, she enacts a contemplative non-instrumentality. On the other, she could be read as the passive object of realist capitalism that instrumentalizes her very act of contemplation and negation. Eilis appears to be completely immobilized and trapped by her environment. Her emigration is decided for her, her American-Italian boyfriend, Tony, persuades her into marriage and thus activates the plot, and throughout the text Eilis is dominated by silence. Young also points to the realistic narrative style as stultifying, to the point that Tóibín, she claims, inhabits Eilis's mind and he "could tell us anything he liked about what she is thinking" (137). This points to the awkwardness of Eilis's detachment throughout the novel.

It is this detachment that is of interest in the narrative. Because of its ambiguity, Eilis's state of mind has given rise to a multitude of critical interpretations, most of which are aligned with Young's idea that Eilis is a trapped, passive, agentless creature, written along the lines of her

predecessor, Joyce's Eveline. Eve Stoddard describes Eilis as "trapped as she faces her reality" (164). Young draws a direct parallel between Eilis and Eveline as women who lack control over their lives and are not free to act. Edward Hagan points to a "double consciousness" (33) in Eilis that ultimately makes her "a marginalized person, left to live in one of those [two] worlds under compulsion" (40). Hagan is also fond of the similitude between Eveline and Eilis, though he claims that Eilis's story reverses that of Eveline—she does achieve emigration, unlike Joyce's protagonist—though with little in way of redemption or liberation from the constraints of her community. Although Eilis succeeds in getting married, she "will now have a marriage that she is locked into by her community: Miss Kelly's action succeeds in changing Eilis's act of freedom into a choice circumscribed by her mother's and her neighbors' insistence on marriage to Tony" (Hagan 42). This, according to Hagan, amounts to "the failure of emigration as liberation" (42). For Young, the parallel between Eveline and Eilis is supposed to resonate even at the level of name choice, as well as that of third-person narrative. They are both passive observers, and they both watch from a window as life passes them by (124). "Both characters seem acted upon[,] not acting" (Young 124). Moreover, Eilis is split between mind and body, with a loneliness that tears at her in Brooklyn, while Eveline experiences a restrictive world at home. For Young, the question arises as to whether there might be a "nominative determinism that indicates how little choice [Eilis] has about where she is going" (134). And even though Young admits that Eilis changes to an extent throughout the story, achieving something very close to glamour upon her return to Ireland, she is still so distant from her actions, so little prepared to take responsibility, that she does not experience a moral dilemma at the point at which she contemplates bigamy.

Using the theory of recessive action detailed by Anne-Lise François's *Open Secrets*, in this paper I argue that in *Brooklyn* renunciation, self-negation, and weak attachments bring about a type of non-instrumental fulfillment that manages to subvert the ethics of ambition and productivity. François's theory of "recessive action" claims that an event is "the idea of 'nothing' as an event made or allowed to happen" (xv). She draws on attitudes and figures that define themselves against action, "whether this is understood in the dramatic sense of public performance, in the moral sense of intervention, or in the economic sense of materialization and productivity" (xv). These figures are mainly characters from the 19th century who are described in terms of "passivity and inconsequence" (xv), to the point of appearing almost self-punishing by virtue of their "ethics of chastity, renunciation, and waste" (xvi). Rather than reading these narratives as stories of self-denial, however, François makes an argument

for “an open secret of fulfilled experience, where the term *open secret* refers to nonemphatic revelation—revelation without insistence and without rhetorical underscoring” (xvi). Fulfillment is located not in success, or fruition, or other forms of unmediated satisfaction, but rather in a “freedom from work” (xvi), whether work be defined in terms of “self-concealment or self-presentation” (xvi).

Polemically, this theory of the open secret “contests the normative bias in favor of the demonstrable, dramatic development and realization of human powers characteristic of, but not limited to, the capitalist investment in value and work and the Enlightenment allegiance to rationalism and unbounded progress” (xvi). François continues by noting the predilection for infusing words like *frankness*, *directness*, *transparency*, and *self-expression* with an unambiguous positive normativity that does not allow for “the reception of the self-quieting, recessive speech acts and hardly emitted announcements . . . of missed or declined experiences” (xvi). These small, quiet acts are certainly aimed against rationalism and the kind of productivity that can be measured, but not only that. They also rescue contemplative life and imaginative play from instrumental reason and goal-oriented action. François calls this approach to life the “ethos of minimal realization” (xviii) which marks, in Romanticism and elsewhere, a turn toward the aesthetic experience that offers a “respite from the rushed action of a modernity so bent on bringing about the future that it leaves no time for the taking—deferral or postponement—of time” (xviii). In an effort to define this aesthetic turn, François uses concepts like “uncounted experience,” “aesthetic play,” “reticent assertion” and

minimal contentment often indistinguishable from a readiness to go without (answer), something that, translated into a psychological ethos, might look like accommodation to a world that promises one no return. Such complaisance without hope, akin to the mildness of the disappointed lover who bears his disappointer no ill will, differs from the tranquility of stoic self-sufficiency and the stoniness of silent protest, although it can easily pass for either. More importantly, however, it represents something more modest, wearier, and less redemptive than the aesthetic project of reconciling duty and inclination and regaining via art the immediacy of nature. (xix)

“Benevolent abandonment” (xix) is a gentle, quiet and generous mode of being, akin to grace, that makes no demands, and expresses no disappointment with reality, such as it is.

Tenuous attachment is a way for Eilis to subvert productivity, whether at home or in exile. When her emigration is determined wordlessly, with

only a tacit agreement on her part (more indecision than agreement), Eilis is already distancing herself from her future thus decided on her behalf:

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 lingered, she realized, it had somehow been tacitly arranged that Eilis would go to America. (Tóibín, *Brooklyn* 23)

Eilis's silence is akin to recessive action, in itself an event allowed to happen. While critics talk about feminine passivity in the hands of a patriarchal culture, priest, and domineering mother, one could also regard Eilis's reticence to participate in decisions that determine the course of her life as a reaction against the uncanniness of her position. Both "home" and "exile" become uncanny in the novel, and Eilis is a poor fit in both Enniscorthy and Brooklyn. Even though Eilis fears that the rest of her life in exile will be a struggle with the unfamiliar, from the beginning of the narrative she retells the daily events of her work at the store as if they were narratives meant to detach her from herself. She dramatizes her performance of productivity at the grocery shop in order to hide from herself and her family how little satisfaction she finds in her position there. Eilis's self-presentation is a form of self-concealment. Jim Farrell, a promising bachelor who makes a fleeting appearance in Eilis's pre-emigration romantic life, sees and does not see her. The same is true for Rose and her mother. With every move away from home, Eilis becomes more uncanny to herself. Estrangement is the condition of the immigrant, but also of the cosmopolitan. Eilis is most successful in what François calls "the ethics of minimal realization," and exile dramatizes her ability to achieve the goals of emigration—marriage, work, property ownership, and social standing—all without trying, and even while working against these goals. Her process of attachment to places and people is rather one of dis-attachment. Her emigration is reluctant, and she is as much undermining and displacing herself as she is situating herself in her new surroundings.

Even as she strives to comply with all that the priest, her boss, her landlord, and her family back in Ireland expect of her in terms of productivity, part of Eilis always lags behind in a mood that could be in turn described as nostalgic, alienated, depressed, estranged from her surroundings and herself, in a way that undermines the capitalist values of self-realization, investment in value and work, rationalism and progress. The narrative works to distance Eilis from the values of frankness, directness and transparency by always sidestepping self-expression. Eilis pointedly does not have a voice. She is silent, and allows herself to be silenced, in a way that contravenes with the normative narratives of female empowerment in

the private and public spheres. In the way she retreats in passivity, secrecy and alienation she pertains more to the sphere of the marginalized and the overlooked, who miss their chance at goal-oriented action. Her sister Rose's death catapults Eilis back into her past in a way that forces her to come to terms with the onrush of modernity that sweeps through Ireland as it does through America. What was stalled in the past—a job, marriage, a home, social standing—comes in flooding in the person of Jim Farrell. A rationalist, instrumental, and productive modern woman, newly schooled in the glamour of America, which seems to follow her around like an aura, would have found a way to secure for herself all the possibilities embodied in Jim Farrell, including the fact that she would not have previously contracted an impulsive marriage, based on promises of fidelity and trust, to Tony. But Eilis remains true to her quiet, recessive self that is more adept at missing opportunities rather than chasing or landing them, and even as she entertains visions of familiar normality in Enniscorthy, she knows instinctively that she will not go through with any plans of self-affirmation. To a narrative of self-investment, accumulation and victorious encounter with social forces, Eilis opposes an “ethos of minimal realization,” “reticent assertion,” and “minimal encounter” (François xviii), all of which is a way of acknowledging the odd fact that resignation in this narrative leads to a form of non-traditional fulfillment.

Even though the writing style of the novel is generally described as realist, in the way he eschews certainty, *Tóibín* undermines realism. In an interview with Joseph Wiesenfarth, *Tóibín* confessed that he was “terribly interested . . . in [the] level of moral mistiness surrounding characters” (8) in the novels of Joseph Conrad, in the idea that “in the middle of the whole thing he can put somebody at levels of ambiguity surrounding their moral being” (8). Ágnes Kovács is another critic who points to the “Jamesian secret” that envelops *Tóibín*'s narrative like an open secret. Kovács points out that *Brooklyn* inherits a Jamesian legacy of “ambiguity in the complications of this immigrant story” that “enhances the fluidity and socially preprogrammed nature of the immigrant experience Eilis undergoes.” As such, Kovács posits that Eilis is neither a heroine nor a villain, but a helpless character in a morally ambiguous situation.

Kovács presents the secrecy of Eilis's life in terms of the intersection between the private and public sphere. On one end, we see Eilis projecting herself in to the existing narratives of women in “mortal moral danger in America” (Kovács), mostly due to 19th-century conventions of the Anglo-Irish immigrant novel that portrayed women losing their Catholic faith and moral virtues once they left the security of their own home parishes. On the other end, Brooklyn itself is portrayed as a public place in which traditional identities can be reconfigured, and conventional notions about

gender, agency and subjection can be problematized. Most importantly, the meaning of “home” shifts with diasporic identity—“never at home in the homeland or in the host land” (Kovács). The private and the public spheres intersect and collide at the intersection between Irish traditional moral values and American social expectations that problematize those values. Public representations of Ireland, Kovács notes, oscillate between “dreary” and lacking in possibilities to nostalgic, idealized versions. These are constructed in the States. The third representation is constructed on Irish land, upon homecoming. As it happens to Eilis, on her return for her sister’s funeral, she finds herself cast in the role of the popular, glamorous young woman who is suddenly offered prospects that were not there when she left—a suitable job position and an attractive marriage offer. Suddenly, the two spheres, private and public, converge into one, as Brooklyn’s materialistic and social glamour and Ireland’s moral values coexist in the same setting, with Eilis filtering the changes through her newfound consciousness.

To navigate the sudden change in consciousness, as she is trying to separate illusion from reality, Eilis has recourse to silence as a means of communication. Kovács points out that Eilis communicates through silence at important junctures in her life: she keeps silent when her journey to the U.S. is arranged for her, in her letters to her family regarding her anxiety about immigration, her relationship with Tony, particularly after her journey back to Ireland, and about her marital status during Jack’s courtship. Her secretive propensities escalate to the point where she herself is tempted into confusing illusion for reality. Kovács sees proof of Jamesian influences in the novel because of the way Jamesian moral ambiguity allows for

the presence of two or more possible moral imperatives in a given situation that cannot be exercised at the same time. . . . Lying, silence, and betrayal get entangled here in a Jamesian fashion, in a process through which a traditional referential notion of truth becomes battled. (Kovács)

Kovács notes that the morality of Eilis’s decisions is rendered complex by the fact that she has to choose between competing concepts of duty that are superimposed on each other. She also considers Eilis’s immigrant experience and the fact that she has to navigate new cultural contexts premised on changing definitions of duty:

From the perspective of Jamesian ambiguity it needs to be pointed out that in *Brooklyn* the concept of “familial duty” itself changes its meaning which makes the need to return to duty problematic itself. . . . So the question of duty becomes more complex than a moral question of right and wrong, because the two concepts of duty are interposed on each other. (Kovács)

There is, thus, a way in which immigrant experience is entangled with secrecy, ambiguity, and complex moral decisions found at the intersection between the call of the new life and its contradictions vis-à-vis the call of the old one. Such complexities having to do with the new American setting cannot even be communicated to her family back in Ireland, except through indirections (as when Eilis first hesitates to accept Tony's occupation as a plumber as acceptable to her family back in Ireland, and later deferring to disclose her relationship to her family, for fear that Tony might be deemed unsuitable). The same thing happens in reverse: Eilis is unable to disclose her marital status to Jack, because divorce, while relatively socially accepted in America, is almost inconceivable to a prosperous middle-class man such as Jack.

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Eilis realizes she is developing a “double self” (Kovács) that a U.S. native like Tony does not have to struggle with. As she watches Tony, she is aware of a transparency and directness that indicates he harbors no concealed identities:

She discovered a vantage point from where, unless he looked directly upwards and to the left, he would not see her. . . . Yet somehow that delight seemed to come with a shadow, and she wondered as she watched him if she herself, in all uncertainty and distance from him, was the shadow and nothing else. It occurred to her he was as he appeared to her; there was no other side to him. (Tóibín, *Brooklyn* 144)

Her double consciousness, first discovered in Brooklyn, when it resulted in a deep sense of alienation, becomes more profound in Ireland when she feels as though she is split in two. This constant split leads to a shift in meaning of terms like home and duty, and this shift, in turn, leads to helplessness and moral ambiguity. While this might be true, and it is obvious that immigration and the constant shift between two normative cultures takes a toll, I would like to argue that this does not necessarily turn Eilis into the passive, helpless victim that Kovács and other critics see. I argue instead that Eilis is not passive because of helplessness or victimization. This is obvious in the way we see her in control of her choices through the narrative, and we register her self-awareness and inner critical voice that are able to rationalize her decisions at each juncture, including the fact that she is fully aware of the double game she plays, holding both Tony and Jack in tension at the same time. Rather than characterize Eilis's journey as morally ambiguous, I employ terminology of ethic and aesthetic deferral and benevolent abandonment that is also a “strange modality of patience, generous even, that leads to odd resignation as a form of fulfillment” (François xix).

Eilis consciously and strategically retreats into “recessive action,” thus defining herself against action as it is generally and publicly defined. Most importantly, she retreats from the very notion of public performance and productivity, where one’s decision must make social sense to one’s outer circle of family and community. Such figures appear therefore to those around them as passive and inconsequential through their “ethics of chastity, renunciation, and waste” (François xv). To the protagonists of renunciation, however, the retreat into the private understanding of self-denial as a means of acting and deciding becomes an open secret of a kind of fulfillment located not in success, fruition, or other types of publicly revealed forms of self-satisfaction, but rather in the freedom from proving oneself through self-presentation.

Such public silencing is perceived as succumbing to disappointment or the reality principle and accepting one’s lack of options and lack of fulfillment (the way Joyce’s Eveline does). But in rejecting adherence to social norms and expectations, be they American or Irish, Eilis opts instead for fulfillment through means other than direct and instrumental. Like Jane Austen’s Fanny Price, she ultimately gets what she wants, and more, far from settling for less, and freed from the carefully calculated moves of the woman seeking to arrange a suitable marriage and social standing for herself. It seems as if Eilis’s situation is resolved favorably by the end of the novel—married to a good husband with property in a progressively developing area of Long Island, education and promising job prospects, should she choose to pursue them—not despite her passivity, but rather because of it. It is Tony who insists on marriage, it is the priest who arranges schooling for Eilis, it is Miss Fortini who offers her a leave of absence from work and encourages her trip to Ireland, it is Jack who insists on marriage, and all the while Eilis contemplates her fate as its chain after meaningful chain link under her very eyes. Her public performance is one of holding on to the tension of the in-between. Her attachments, while temporarily maintained, are tenuous at best, but her small, quiet, and reticent acts produce in the end results as decisive, or even more so, than any cold calculations could render.

Eilis resolves her disappointments, indeterminacies and contradictions in her acceptance of her marriage to Tony. The way she embraces a future with him is, in many ways, the fulfillment of the mythic American dream promised to immigrants. This is embodied, as Savu (266) points out, in the specifics of property and consumeristic power—a piece of land on Long Island and career ambitions that amount, in Eilis’s view, to “much more than she had imagined she would have when she arrived in Brooklyn first” (Tóibín, *Brooklyn* 163). On the other hand, Eilis’s fantasy fulfillment comes about not through the expenditure of productive capitalist energy

squandered to the molding of the public sphere, to her advantage, but rather despite Eilis's lack of capitalist savvy, to the extent that she felt, and behaved, as if she always belonged somewhere else, moving through a sense of "dark confusion" (192), mutely and obliquely, always wishing "she could say something clear" (193). If there is a fantasy taking shape in the course of the novel for Eilis, it is that of constant negotiation of what is real and what only seems real, but will prove in the end to be illusory. Eilis lives in a constant interlude between the old and the new world, and the way she navigates it is to shut herself off from possibilities of happiness beyond the immediate: "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).

Stoddard notes that migration, and the severing of attachments from the home base, especially in the case of Irish women, was regarded with suspicion, and "was a mark of abjection, a sign of empowerment, or both" (156). If Eilis's struggle is between "mute obedience and meeting her own desires" (157), then the ambiguity of her position might just be a reaction to the competitive interests demanded by it. Both places become *unheimlich*, or unfamiliar, to her. In turn, she regards America, and later Ireland, as surrounded by the haze of a dream, and she often acts as if trapped in a dream-like state. Emigration and living death seem compatible metaphors at times in the novel, as Stoddard points out (161). "Home" becomes a place of alienation, no matter on which side of the Atlantic it is found. Eilis feels like a nobody, or even a zombie in Brooklyn, but she is also disconnected from the role of the dutiful daughter she feels it incumbent upon herself to perform in Ireland. In fact, her passive acquiescence to the romance initiated by Jim Farrell might be a way for her to cope with the detachment she feels toward her own home, mother, and Rose's things and memory. Her moral split does not speak so much to morality, as to disconnection from any agency—moral or otherwise. Her ghostly presence unto herself is rendered as a hazy illusion. While in Ireland, Eilis recalls her time in America as

a sort of fantasy, something she could not match with the time she was spending at home. It made her 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. (*Tóibín, Brooklyn* 218)

The splitting and doubling of the self can be seen as a disconnection from moral agency, but I read them as a way of loosely holding on to reality.

Clair Wills notes that there is a type of literature of immigration that focuses on 1960s Irish working-class realism told from the perspective of social mobility through a romance plot (110). In these texts, however, the link between home, family, and social mobility does not maintain its continuity due to the peripheral and uncertain status of Irish migrants. Tóibín was directly interested in the marginalized groups that were progressively rendered more visible by the fiction of the 1990s. “If you surround huge areas of expression with silence for so long and then a society suddenly opens up . . . a lot of people are going to start writing clearly and dramatically,” Tóibín confessed to Alan Riding at the end of the 1990s, when he was pointing to a resurgence of Irish fiction focusing on working-class female protagonists that were for the first time in Irish literary history moving from the margins to the center. In Tóibín’s tale of immigration, the shift to the center happens along the lines of constructing a new American self that redefines her Irish public identity as well, moving her into a new category, which at the time of the writing of the novel Tóibín described in an interview with Paul Morton as the “New Irish,” an emerging politicized class: “Some of the impulse for this [book] is entirely political. . . . [I]here were times in the last 15 years where I felt alone in Ireland in my views on immigration. . . . I believed—and I know this is an unsustainable belief—in an open door policy.”

Brooklyn evokes an “affective experience” as a reminder to Tóibín’s contemporaries of a recent past in which the Irish themselves had once occupied “the place of the despised or barely tolerated Other: a place now inhabited in Ireland by the Poles, the Nigerians, the Filipinos, and the Chinese” (Cullingford 81). As a character closer to the working class, marginalized categories currently populating Ireland, Eilis embodies future America as a place where emotional losses are balanced out by the potential gains (Cullingford 84). This does not conceal the fact that emigration is closely linked to exile and trauma, and the feeling of displacement gives rise both to grievance and empathy for the newly displaced Others. The in-betweenness of emigration points to a reality constituted by the conditions of late capitalism where economic instability, institutionalized racism and increased surveillance create a death of the social sphere.

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