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"IT WAS IMPORTANT NOT TO ASK": SILENCE IN COLM TÓIBÍN'S *LONG ISLAND*[1]

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ABSTRACT. Drawing on various theories and approaches, from its application to fiction to its socio-cultural dimensions and presence within communication, this study considers Colm Tóibín's use of silence as a key narrative element and aesthetic practice in *Long Island* (2024), inviting some comparisons with its prequel, *Brooklyn* (2009). As shall be explained, silence operates on different levels in *Long Island*. Thanks to Tóibín's tightly controlled release of information, silence becomes crucial to plot development and suspense, and vividly recreates the tensions between concealment and revelation. Silence, too, works for the sake of characterisation, and serves to dramatise the protagonists' crises and indecisions, as well as their strategies of manipulation. On some other occasions, though, silence contributes to mutual understanding, increasing closeness and intimacy between characters. All in all, this study details the ways silence informs narrative style, endows characters with psychological complexity, and enriches the subject matter of Tóibín's *Long Island*.

Keywords; Brooklyn, Colm Tóibín, Long Island, silence.

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[1] I dedicate this essay to the memory of Eibhear Walshe (1962-2024).

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"ERA IMPORTANTE NO PREGUNTAR": EL SILENCIO EN *LONG ISLAND*, DE COLM TÓIBÍN

RESUMEN. Haciendo uso de distintas teorías y enfoques, desde su aplicación en la ficción hasta sus dimensiones socioculturales y presencia en todo acto comunicativo, este artículo estudia la importancia del silencio como elemento narrativo y estético en *Long Island* (2024) de Colm Tóibín, comparándola con su precuela, *Brooklyn* (2009). El silencio, como se explicará, funciona a distintos niveles en *Long Island*. El silencio contribuye al desarrollo de la trama, recreando las tensiones entre el ocultamiento y la revelación de información crucial, aspecto sobre el que Tóibín ejerce un claro control para generar suspense en la novela. El silencio, además, también sirve para representar momentos de crisis e indecisión, así como las estrategias de manipulación de sus personajes. Otras veces, no obstante, los silencios abren la puerta a la compresión mutua, y a una mayor cercanía e intimidad entre los protagonistas. Este artículo, por tanto, analiza cómo el silencio no es solamente parte del estilo narrativo de la novela de Tóibín, sino que dota de complejidad y profundidad a sus personajes y temática.

Palabras clave: Brooklyn, Colm Tóibín, Long Island, silencio.

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Set in 1970s New York and Enniscorthy, rural Ireland, *Long Island* (2024) is the long-awaited sequel of Colm Tóibín's highly popular and critically acclaimed *Brooklyn* (2009).[2] Even if the reading of the previous novel enhances the understanding of the latter one, Tóibín himself dislikes the label "sequel" for the follow-up *Long Island* (Allardice), as the story begins twenty years later, when the Irish emigrée Eilis Lacey receives the shocking, life-disrupting news that her husband, Tony, had an affair with another married woman and will shortly become the father of a baby whom she might be forced to live with, raise, or even legally adopt. Part of an extended Italian-American family (the Fiorelli) that keeps secrets from her, the aggrieved, isolated Eilis begins to perceive how her manipulative mother-in-law, Francesca, makes decisions behind her back and conspires against her with the collaboration of Tony. Finding herself powerless, Eilis decides to visit her eighty-year-old mother and spend the summer in Enniscorthy, to be joined by her two teenage children (Larry and Rosella) several weeks after her arrival. Unsure what to do about her family life in America, Eilis falls into a romantic relationship with Jim Farrell, as she had already done in *Brooklyn*. This time, however, Jim has a secret of his own: he is engaged to Nancy Sheridan, Eilis' best friend in town. Told from the perspectives of each of the three protagonists in consecutive chapters, this

[2] Tóibín's best-selling novel so far, *Brooklyn* was awarded the Costa Novel of the Year. In 2015, director John Crowley adapted it into a film that became a major commercial success, especially in the United States.

love triangle comes to occupy most of the novel's narrative space from Part Two onwards. The tension erupts when Nancy discovers Jim's double life with Eilis, and decides not to confront him, but to make their engagement public earlier than expected. As Tóibín relates in a podcast (Cruz and Tóibín), the plot heavily relies on silence in its portrayal of "the intrigues surrounding any form of adultery", of "things hidden, things withheld, things half told" (00:11:00-06). In *Long Island*, as in some other novels by Tóibín, silence not only becomes fundamental for plot development, but also informs the characters' sensibility as they negotiate the demands of others and their own personal needs.[3]

Tóibín is, in fact, well-known for his skilful use of silence,[4] which typically highlights "the tensions between revelation and concealment, emotional release and reticence, as well as the ambiguities between knowing and unknowing, which underlie most of his characters' dilemmas", all this "in relation to the complex web of society and interpersonal relationships" (Carregal-Romero, "Varieties of Silence" 66). In certain situations, Tóibín's protagonists remain withdrawn and taciturn, and their silences usually reveal intimate, conflicted emotions that are hard to express, or even fully understand. In the specific case of *Long Island*, early reviewers have generally agreed on the prominent role of silence in the novel. For Mia Levitin, silence in Tóibín's work effectively transmits the limits of (self)-knowledge, of the ever-present human uncertainties that produce the "gaps between thought and language where meaning resides". Another reviewer has called Tóibín "a master of silence and shadows" and opines that the power of his fiction resides in "the things not said, the feelings not acted on" (Allardice). Perhaps the review that most clearly focuses on silence in *Long Island* is the one by Ellen Akins, who argues that the story's suspense is "amplified" thanks to Tóibín's careful equilibrium between "the forces of secrecy and revelation" –in such a scenario, "not saying is an act with consequences". Not saying, Akins adds, can also become a silence of self-regulation, since Tóibín's characters "constantly cauti[on] themselves not to say anything" as they attempt to maintain "that fine balance that exists in intimacy as much as in community". In my analysis of the novel, I shall expand on these early appreciations of silence, as well as identify further configurations of it, in Tóibín's *Long Island*.

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[3] The presence of silence in the cultural panorama of contemporary Ireland has also been assessed in Beville and McQuaid's essay, "Speaking of Silence: Comments from an Irish Studies Perspective", where they explain how, in Irish literature, "it becomes clear that silence is both the unspeakable and the unspoken and so it functions as both an obvious zone of disempowerment but also an empowering act of strategically asserting or circumventing certain discourses of authority and control" (17).

[4] In numerous articles and interviews, the writer himself has often referred to the importance of silence in his literary creation and has acknowledged the influence of authors like James Joyce, Ernest Hemingway, and Elizabeth Bishop. For Tóibín, these authors were masters of silence because they understood that "words themselves, if rendered precisely and exactly with no flourishes, could carry even more coiled emotion than an ornate phrase or sentences filled with elaborate textures" (*On Elizabeth Bishop* 53).

As subject matter and aesthetic practice, silence serves to illuminate "the failings of language and the existence of a realm of the unsayable that all of us must acknowledge" (Sim 134), becoming a most effective medium to convey complex, ambivalent emotional states that defy easy comprehension and transparent articulation, like "indecision, divided loyalties or the undertows of grief or regret", as is often the case in Tóibín's fiction (Carregal-Romero, "Varieties of Silence" 66). Within narrative, silence can be felt as "a moving force", especially at times when words "say more than at first glance they seem to say" (Kenny 87-8), imbued with pauses and hesitations, gestures and indirection, lies and omissions. Acts of silence and silencing cover up uncomfortable truths, maintain secrets and denial, show the chasm between the characters' private and social selves, and punctuate dialogues with avoidance and reluctance, even if silence may alternatively provide a space for reflection, communion with others, and mutual understanding thanks to attentive listening. Produced by the subject and directed toward others, silence can signify oppression, deceit and (self)-censure, but it can also create new possibilities through deferred decision-making, resistance or withdrawal from social norms and conventions. As shall be explained, in Tóibín's *Long Island* much of the energy of silence derives from dialogues where characters carefully select what information to reveal and conceal about their personal situation, feelings, and intentions. Like language, silence can work as a strategy for manipulation, self-protection, or even self-empowerment.

Silence permeates and complements the words we utter; it not only transmits certain forms of tacit knowledge, such as "sensations and intuitions or the effects of taboos and prohibitions" (Caneda-Cabrera and Carregal-Romero 3), but also has a "cultural dimension of its own" (4), embedded as it is in "in social, religious and cultural practices which have shaped individual behaviours and interpersonal relationships" (3). In *Long Island*, for instance, Tóibín barely offers detailed or precise descriptions of social mores, but the public sensibilities of the time are nonetheless vividly evoked through his characters' silences, that is, their evasions and reticence to be open about certain matters. Because silence is context-situated and an integral part of speech, Steven L. Bindeman calls it an "indirect form of discourse" (3). In his *Silence in Philosophy, Literature, and Art*, which addresses the work of notorious artists and intellectuals like Beckett, Kafka, Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and Foucault among many others, Bindeman describes the evolving perceptions on silence in the cultural production of the Western world. Against a tradition of literary realism that usually relegated it to an "invisible and passive background role" (12), Bindeman argues, twentieth-century authors turned to silence as "something which has a presence all its own" (13), for example, in their depictions of the gaps and contradictions in human thinking and communication, or in their representations of the ineffable and unknowable. Drawing on Susan Sontag's groundbreaking essay "The Aesthetics of Silence" (1967), Bindeman theorises silence as "dialectical" (20), only perceived when the artist creates a void or empty space around scenes and events, employing such tactics as reduction, spareness, suggestiveness, and allusion. Where excessive speech closes off further thought, "silence teaches us how to pay attention to the world around us"

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(Bindeman 21). Skilled writers, Bindeman opines, manage to dramatise silence “as a kind of perceptual and cultural therapy” (22). Precisely in this way, Tóibín’s aesthetics of silence has been studied in connection with his “restrained”, “unadorned” prose, which peels back language just to “ope[n] things up” and infuse “potential for nuance and uncertainty”, enriching and complicating the subject matter of his novels and short stories (Delaney 17).[5]

Silence is therefore a highly productive rhetorical device in fiction. As has been suggested so far, silence–in all its varieties–is a matter of style, form and content, and can be metaphorically used to “enhance, reinforce, underline or heighten the expressive/communicative force of the particular context(s) and theme(s) in which [it] occur[s]” (Khatchadourian 81). For the sake of dramatic effect, silence can generate much tension, mystery, and ambiguity when crucial information is delayed or never disclosed, or when visibly damaged characters refuse (or remain unable) to express their emotional truths–in Tóibín’s *The Blackwater Lightship* (1999), for example, Declan’s inability to speak about his disease (he is dying of AIDS) tells a story of its own.[6] In *Long Island*, too, some absences stand out as resonant silences. When Eilis, still in New York, reads her mother’s letter, the absence of Jim’s name (or perhaps its deliberate silencing) paradoxically revives the memory of her lost love opportunity: “It was strange to be reminded of what had happened by the absence of Jim Farrell’s name on a list of people in the town, some of whom she barely remembered” (38). By means of indirection, Tóibín illustrates Eilis’ hidden longings for Jim, about whom she had never spoken in her married life with Tony.[7] Another example in *Long Island* where silence speaks through absence and indirection is Eilis’ reticence to talk about Tony once she is in Enniscorthy (she does the same in *Brooklyn*, but for other reasons), which is quickly interpreted as a signal that her marriage might be in crisis. In their first meeting, Nancy responds with tactful silence: “For a moment, Nancy was going to ask Eilis about the man she had married in America, but then decided to wait and see if Eilis would bring up his name. She thought it strange that her friend did not mention him” (66). The shameful silences of taboo are also present in *Long Island*. Asked whether she is having an affair with Frank, a surprised Eilis obliquely tells Tony that his brother is homosexual–“Frank is one of those men” –, provoking her husband’s reaction of violent disgust and disbelief: “I need to be sure that no one says this again” (24). Silence, as already indicated, is prevalent throughout Tóibín’s novel. In what follows, this study shall explore different types of silence in *Long Island,* contrasting them

[5] Some other critics have referred to the important role of silence, for example, in the ways Tóibín recreates his characters’ interiority. In this respect, Laura Elena Savu has observed how, in many of his stories, “intimations of attachment are strongly felt but rarely spoken … Much of the action, in fact, takes place below the surface, in the resonance of tone, gesture, and silence” (255).

[6] See Carregal-Romero (“Varieties of Silence” 72-6) for an extended analysis of Declan’s silence in Tóibín’s *The Blackwater Lightship*.

[7] Eilis had never told Tony about Jim simply because, as she notes, “her being away that summer was simply never mentioned” upon her return to America, something that “had made life easy between them” (167).

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with the ones in his previous *Brooklyn* and the way the protagonist, Eilis, is constructed in both novels.

In terms of the meanings and configurations of silence, there is an interesting evolution to trace between *Brooklyn* and *Long Island*. Tory Young (131-7) argues that in *Brooklyn*, where Eilis is the only focal point, Tóibín relies on narrative distance to portray his character's muteness and powerlessness in the face of events outside her control and life-changing decisions she is not supposed to make. Young explains that, whereas the proportion of direct and free indirect speech is "relatively small" (131),[8] *Brooklyn* abounds with "narrative report of thought acts" that foregrounds Eilis' moments of isolation and incapacity to assert herself (137). The text insistently reports the insecurities, speculations and personal wishes that "she could tell no one" (Tóibín, *Brooklyn* 87): Eilis, for instance, silently witnesses her family's decision for her emigration to America,[9] but her unspoken anguish emerges a bit later, when she reflects that "she would have given anything to be able to say plainly that she did not want to go" (*Brooklyn* 31). In this passage and others, Tóibín uses silence to characterise Eilis not just in her voicelessness, but in her self-imposed "distance between [herself] and her emotions" (Young 137). Instead of experiencing those emotions directly, Eilis tends rationalise them–a detachment that has been perceived as the protagonist's "defense mechanism of repressing her feelings" (Stoddard 161). No such repression (or narrative distance) occurs in *Long Island,* where Eilis, now in her forties, has "really become quite articulate", and therefore does not hesitate to make her opinions heard, even if it is to the dismay of others (Cruz and Tóibín 00:07:29-33). The silence affecting Eilis in *Long Island*, as will be explained in further detail, is not one of renunciation and self-suppression, but one that is mostly situated in relationship dynamics, in the intrigues of "not having her know" about some important matters (Cruz and Tóibín 00:12:06). Much of the dramatic power of Part One, for instance, revolves around the Fiorelli family's silent conspiracy against Eilis, and how she–and, by extension, the reader–slowly grows awareness of her husband and mother-in-law's manipulations and tactics of deception.

Social context can also become a wider arena where silence operates, where setting becomes no mere background but a cultural space that contributes to characterisation. In their appreciations of silence in *Brooklyn*, some critics have referred to the topic of migration in mid-twentieth century Ireland, and how this

[8] The opposite is true in *Long Island*, where dialogue and free indirect speech are much more frequent. The following quote, for example, feels as if readers were inside Jim's mind as he ponders over his moral dilemma: "And how would he live knowing that he had betrayed Nancy? How could he coldly inform her that he did not want to be with her? That was on one side of the scales. On the other was a question that was starker and more pressing: how could he let this chance to be with Eilis slip by?" (217).

[9] If, in *Brooklyn*, Eilis silently accepts the decisions others make for her, in *Long Island* she reclaims her agency from the very beginning of the novel. Right after learning about her husband's betrayal, she abandons the business of the Fiorelli family and finds another job.

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was often experienced as a loss within the family and community.[10] In her analysis of *Brooklyn*, Ellen McWilliams identifies a "culture of silence" surrounding migration; just as Eilis herself is "almost afraid to speak of her emigrant brothers" (176), her planned departure is similarly confronted with uneasy, grievous silence by herself, her family, and friends. This social silence thus appears to reinforce a collective denial of the trauma of migration, which could partly explain Eilis' sustained tendency "to be silently acquiescent to [her] own suffering" (Costello-Sullivan 197). In *Brooklyn*, this self-repression adds to Eilis' conscious efforts to maintain a "socially-acceptable and calm exterior" for the sake of social respectability within her patriarchal milieu (Costello-Sullivan 197). In the final chapter, Eilis–whom Tony had led into a hasty marriage before her visit to Enniscorthy–is forced to abandon Jim without explanation and immediately return to New York so as to avoid sexual scandal and punishment, a situation that "expos[es] the restrictions of the limited constructions of gender, sexuality and the family in Irish society" (Carregal-Romero, "The Irish Female Migrant" 140). The prevailing Catholic morality of mid-twentieth century Ireland is hence a key factor in the novel's course of events.

In *Long Island*, set twenty years later, moral norms are not so overtly determinant as in *Brooklyn*, yet they do have a significant influence on protagonists, who often feel compelled to self-regulate. These moral norms in *Long Island* need not be articulated for the characters, but nonetheless surface within the narrative through their acts of dissimulation and subterfuge. This silence of discretion, Tóibín suggests, features as reaction against those "people not named in the book who seem to have the enormous power of watching and making judgments and being moralistic" (Cruz and Tóibín 00:13:27-30). We are reminded in this way of Pierre Bourdieu's famous statement that "the most successful ideological effects are the ones that have no need of words, but only of *laissez-faire* and complicitous silence" (133). At the start of Part Two, for instance, readers learn about Nancy and Jim's secret relationship and furtive encounters late at night, a secrecy they have been maintaining for a year while "working out how a widow aged forty-six with three children … might marry a bachelor of the same age" (60). The fact that they do not want to be publicly seen as a couple gives a sense that their relationship does not conform to generally approved standards. It is only at the end of the novel that Tóibín reveals the weight of Nancy's moral challenge by having another widow, Eilis' elderly mother, harshly criticise re-marriage in front of her daughter: "When I go to my reward, I will expect your father to be waiting for me in heaven. How else would I live if I didn't have that to look forward to? … Imagine then if I went and got married to a second fellow!" (274). In *Long Island*, the mores of conservative Catholic Ireland are subtly but consistently represented not by being explicitly addressed, but by dramatising their effects on the protagonists' decisions, behaviours and relationships with others.

[10] See Savu; McWilliams; Morales-Ladrón and Carregal-Romero ("The Irish Female Migrant"). Morales-Ladrón, for example, argues that the novel draws on the widespread silence that has been culturally maintained on the Irish emigrant experience, which was "particularly applicable to women" (177).

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On the level of characterisation, silence can be self-regulatory as much as a strategy to allow oneself "some autonomy away from the expectations of others"; for example, in *Brooklyn* Eilis consciously omits Tony's existence when she is back in town partly "because of her newly found illusions of remaking her life in Ireland" (Carregal-Romero, "The Irish Female Migrant" 137-8). As a returnée, the Eilis of *Brooklyn* is now offered her dream job (and a love life with Jim, too), something which would have never happened had she told her neighbours about her American marriage. Hers seems to be the silence of a character that is aware of the ambiguous potential of withholding important personal information. A similar view is held by Camelia Raghinaru, who argues that in *Brooklyn* Tóibín "distanc[es] Eilis from the values of frankness, directness and transparency by always sidestepping self-expression" (47). Some of Eilis' silences, which keep options open and "hol[d] on the tension of the in-between" (Raghinaru 51), become a response to her difficult position, trapped as she is between her desires and obligations towards others.

In *Long Island*, it is not Eilis but Jim that is largely characterised by this tense silence of indecision, of being in-between two irreconcilable positions. *Long Island* returns to the topics of "duplicity, illicit love, misguided loyalty", which Ágnes Zsófia Kovács considers in light of Henry James' influence on Tóibín,[11] in how the American author portrayed "moral ambiguity" and "the power of secrets" through a controlled third-person limited point of view.[12] In *Long Island*, Jim has for long silently regretted his past inaction concerning Eilis' sudden and unexpected return to America; twenty years later, their encounter rekindles his old desire to pursue a romantic relationship with her. From Jim's perspective, readers witness how he internalises his first lie by omission (asked by Eilis why he never married, he does not speak about his engagement with Nancy) as an almost innocent act, a way to maintain "the excitement he felt in her presence": "He wanted to keep this going, whatever it was" (179). This initial act of silence makes possible Jim's subsequent affair with Eilis, which involves a double secrecy,[13] as it needs to remain secret from his other secret relationship with Nancy. Since Eilis can offer him no promises of continuity upon her return to New York, Jim can hardly leap into the unknown, abandoning Nancy and their plans

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[11] Tóibín himself is the author of the acclaimed biographical novel *The Master* (2004), which tells the life of Henry James between 1895 and 1899. Tóibín also published numerous essays on James' literary techniques and how they nourished his own fiction. These essays were edited and collected by Susan M. Griffin in the book *All a Novelist Needs: Colm Tóibín on Henry James* (2010).

[12] In interview with Joseph Wiesenfarth, Tóibín describes his use of this narrative voice. This is a style he claims to have inherited from Henry James: "You see, if you work in detail on characters in the third person and see everything through their eyes, the readers builds up a sympathy with them no matter who they are … It is a system that James perfected, which is that the only thing that you are told in the book is what this person notices. You as reader become the protagonist because you see the world through the character, especially if the world the author has been drawing seems emotionally truthful" (15).

[13] Unaware of Jim's engagement with Nancy, Eilis shares Jim's desire for secrecy about their relationship, as she does not want to have this extra-marital affair affect her possible divorce settlement in America.

together. In this difficult scenario, silences surface in almost all interactions between the characters, and clearly contribute to the story's growing suspense.

As in *Brooklyn*, "lying, silence, and betrayal get entangled" (Kovács) here in *Long Island*, especially so in the figures of Tony (Part One) and Jim (the rest of the novel). In the final Part, Nancy's rushed public announcement of their engagement–she uses her old wedding ring and shows it around–lets Jim know that she became aware of his double life. Yet Nancy's silence about his betrayal (she is visibly hurt but does not want to end their relationship) makes it even harder for Jim to explain himself, as she seems afraid to hear his confession that, had circumstances been different, Jim would have preferred Eilis: "She could easily have confronted him directly about Eilis, but that would have opened the way for him to tell her he was leaving" (283). If Nancy's reaction barely resolves Jim's inner conflict, Eilis' is similarly confusing for him. Far from showing any type of frustration or disappointment after learning about his engagement with Nancy, Eilis retreats into a silence of enforced detachment and coldness toward Jim. Asked what she would do if he followed her to New York, Eilis replies with a long, pensive silence: "She looked around the room and then directly at him. He sensed that his question still hung in the air and then it became obvious that she wasn't going to answer" (286). Although this is not the reassuring answer Jim would have liked to obtain, this silence allows the hurt Eilis not to give a definitive answer and close the door on a hypothetical future with him. At the very end, as he faces Nancy's wilful blindness and Eilis' silence of indecision, Jim becomes gripped by paralysis. Alone in his room,

> He leaned against the wall and closed his eyes. Maybe tomorrow he would have some idea what to do. But for now he would wait here, do nothing. He would listen to his own breathing and be ready to answer the door when Nancy came at midnight. This is what he would do. (287)

Those are the last lines of *Long Island*, where Tóibín has Jim silenced by his own fears and insecurities. As he typically does in other novels, Tóibín refuses closure and heightens indeterminacy instead, not allowing readers the comfort of an easy resolution for his characters' predicaments. Precisely because of its narrative restraint, Tóibín's open ending in *Long Island*–where no big declarations or crucial decisions are made–leaves readers in a state of suspense, with the anxiety of the unknown and unresolved.

There is in Tóibín's fiction much expressive force in the ambiguities of silence, in the effects it produces when characters can hardly reveal their motives and intentions, or when they sense the reticence and/or manipulations of others. For Kennan Ferguson in his sociological approach, silence derives part of its power from the fact that it "cannot be fixed into [a] singular interpretation" (62), and remains "open to processes of domination, emancipation, and resistance which can never be fully contained, represented, or comprehended" (63). Enmeshed in those processes, "[silence] disturbs precisely because the ideal of transparent speech is the presumed mode of affiliation in our cultural practices" (Ferguson 63). In Part One of *Long Island,* Eilis experiences this "disturbance" of silence several times in

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conversations with her mother-in-law, Francesca. From Frank, her gay brother-in-law, Eilis learnt (but promised not to mention it) that Francesca had arranged the baby's adoption behind her back, keeping her out of any conversations about it (the baby is to live in the house-next-door, at Tony's parents'). Now that Tony's out-of-wedlock child is to appear within the family, Francesca would like to normalise the situation by displaying a seemingly kind, sympathetic attitude toward the aggrieved Eilis so as to persuade her that her own solution is the most sensible one (Eilis, as she told Tony, would rather have the baby returned to its mother, even though the woman's husband violently refuses to raise it). Riddled with tension, the final conversation between Eilis and Francesca becomes a battle for control as well as a challenge to one another's moral authority. In-between their words, Tóibín inserts numerous pauses describing Eilis' reflections on how to respond to Francesca's deliberate evasions:

> "Her mother-in-law left silence. When Eilis said nothing, Francesca continued". (41)
>
> "Eilis was tempted to ask Francesca to leave, but then thought…she really did need to hear everything in this meeting". (42-3)
>
> "Francesca seemed, Eilis believed, to have closed the door she had opened for her." (43)
>
> "In the silence that followed, Eilis saw that she had been trapped". (44)
>
> "Even if she were to tell her mother-in-law that she knew the plan, all Francesca had to do was deny it … Eilis realized that the conversation had gone as far as it could. Her mother-in-law was setting out to deceive her". (45)
>
> "Eilis was going to ask her…, but then thought better of it". (45)

As they speak, what they refuse to say matters as much as (or more than) the words they utter. Eilis' desire to know, "to hear everything", is frustrated by Francesca's lies and omissions, which she uses to keep up appearances of innocence (she claims to have discovered the news of the baby much later than she actually did), concern and sincerity toward her daughter-in-law (sensing Eilis' hostility, she does not reveal the plan of legal adoption). Echoing Ferguson's words, Francesca's strategy seems to be part of "a process of domination" that clearly "disturbs the ideal of transparent speech" (63), leaving Eilis confused, silenced, and eventually defeated, unable to change the course of events.[14]

As is also made obvious in the example above, silence has "a presence all its own" (Bindeman 13) within communicative events. According to Kris Acheson, we often recognise silence an "embodied phenomenon", as "[it] produces emotional and physical symptoms in our phenomenal bodies, both when we encounter it and

[14] At this point, Eilis decides to visit Enniscorthy (the first time in twenty years) for an unspecified period as an act of rebellion. This represents a clear contrast with her previous characterisation in *Brooklyn*, where Eilis hardly confronted authority figures and made almost no decisions of her own.

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when we ourselves produce it" (547). This impact of silence is highly dependent on context, and notions of power, hierarchy, and status may well play an important role here: "[The] reactions to others' silence are not simply biological but are correlated to people's situatedness within social structures and the relationships between the producers and perceivers of silence" (Acheson 542). As a matriarch, Francesca counts on the collaboration of other family members to "produce" silence against the distressed Eilis, who perceives her silencing as a blatant attempt to block her from agency. Yet Eilis is not the only victim in Part One of *Long Island*. The oppressive silencing of another woman reverberates here: that of the unfaithful wife and future mother of the baby, Tony's lover, who does not intervene in the story. Although she is given no voice, her silencing speaks volumes of her powerlessness in this patriarchal system.

In his *Long Island*, Tóibín thus illustrates how notions of power have an influence on characters' interpersonal silences; and silence, as cited above, "produces emotional and physical symptoms" (Acheson 547). The strained, uncomfortable silences between Tony and Eilis "fe[el] like a battle between them" (132), so she wishes "she did not have to sit opposite him at the table or sleep beside him at night" (41). Protected by his mother but still emotionally attached to his wife (who has their two children on her side), Tony is in an in-between position, as he is both powerful (he participates and benefits from Francesca's plan) and weak (he hopes, after all, not to be abandoned by Eilis). He is ready to take the blame and accept Eilis' rage, but he will not consider her views on the matter of the baby. Despite his apparent contrition, Tony's sustained muteness–Eilis learned about the future baby from the woman's husband, and, even after that, "Tony still did not tell her what he and his mother planned to do" (36)–seems to be nothing but self-serving, a way to avoid responsibility for his actions. As she struggles to interpret Tony's silences, Eilis fears that his intention is to manipulate her: "She could see that Tony was working on her, looking sad and making sure he did not say a single word that could make relations between any worse. Without her support, he could do nothing" (22). Tony's quiet, low-key attitude has a notable effect: it discourages raw, loud, and bitter arguments between them, and gives Eilis some pause not to make hasty decisions. She reflects on this as she spends time in Enniscorthy with her children, Larry and Rosella, and ponders what to do about her family life upon her return to New York: "She was aware that [Tony] was creating around himself an aura of vulnerability, or innocence even, that would prevent her from saying anything hard and irrevocable, from making a threat that she could not take back" (132). Tony's "aura" of innocence dissipates when Eilis intercepts Francesca's letter to Rosella, which contains a picture of him holding the newly arrived baby, named Helen Frances (Tony remains accessory to his mother's plan). In her letter, Francesca deliberately fails to address and recognise Eilis' plight and suffering, while sugar-coating this thorny situation for the young Rosella.[15] Francesca's letter is yet another

[15] Referring to the picture of the baby, for example, Francesca exclaims: "I knew you would want to see her. How lucky she is, I told her, to have a sister like you! …We are longing to see you when you are back, and that, of course, includes little Helen Frances" (247). Here,

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act of silencing for the sake of family unity, one that sacrifices Eilis and makes obvious her marginal, outsider status.

Importantly, though, in *Long Island* Tóibín inserts some other configurations of silence which do not revolve around power dynamics (subjugation and/or resistance), but around care and attentiveness toward the other. Drawing on Gemma Corradi Fiumara's *The Other Side of Language* (1990), which studies the correlations between speech, silence/silencing and different forms of listening, Katariina Kaura-aho underlines how some acts of silence (pauses, observation, etc.) create the necessary conditions for constructive dialogue and mutual understanding. Due to the speaker's demands, expectations, and anxieties, "speech can be an impatient and possessively oriented practice"– "in silence", however, "one can come to know encountered objects and people slowly and tentatively, without drowning them out through one's own verbal expression" (Kaura-aho 72). In *Long Island*, Tóibín punctuates many of the dialogues between Jim and Eilis with significant moments of self-restraint and observation (some of them implicit, and others described by the narrator), which help them reconnect emotionally, strengthen their bonds of intimacy, and slowly come to terms with their painful separation in the past. This is done not through plainly spoken confessions or justifications, but through their tactful silences and tacit acknowledgment of mutual longing. In their first encounter, as they walk alone on the strand in Cush, Eilis alludes to her previous time in Enniscorthy, something which, she realises, revives Jim's saddest memories:

> 'This is my first time since then.'
>
> Neither of them, he knew, would have any trouble remembering what 'then' meant … It struck him that since this was probably the last time he would see her, he should say something. But then he thought it would be best to leave it. There was nothing to say, or nothing that was easy or simple, nothing that he could find words for now.
>
> 'You look so sad,' she said.
>
> 'I feel sad seeing you.'
>
> 'Don't be sad about that. It was the way it had to be.'
>
> 'And do you ever…?'
>
> 'Ever?'
>
> 'I don't know. Do you ever think about me?'
>
> As soon as he had said it, he knew how wrong it sounded … He watched her thinking; she had decided, he saw, not to respond … He would say nothing more to embarrass her or himself. (147-8)

as in the rest of the letter, Francesca disregards the emotional conflict that the situation causes not just for Eilis, but for her two children as well.

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Followed by Eilis' appreciation of his sadness, Jim's personal question is left in the air. Eilis' silence creates a space of self-protection, since a direct, honest answer would have opened the way for a conversation that she is not ready to have yet. Far from adopting an "impatient and possessively oriented" form of speech (Kaura-aho 72), Jim knows how to leave silence so as not to impose his communicative expectations and/or anxieties on Eilis. Something similar occurs when they meet again; even if Jim feels the urge to learn about Eilis' situation with Tony, he instinctively knows that "it was important not to ask" (178). The topic, though, is eventually raised, but Eilis would rather not give too much detail at this point: "He nodded and then examined her carefully as she hesitated… She was letting him know there was a problem at home. She had, he thought, said enough to make that plain" (179). As a good listener, Jim understands that, to avoid Eilis' discomfort, no further clarifications should be elicited. A positive dynamic of interpersonal silences can therefore be identified between these two protagonists, which fosters their growing closeness and intimacy as the story progresses towards their resumed love relationship twenty years later.

Drawing on various theories on silence, from its application to fiction to its socio-cultural dimensions and presence within speech, this analysis of Tóibín's latest novel, *Long Island,* has highlighted the writer's ongoing literary engagement with silence as a key narrative element and aesthetic practice. Silence, for example, is central to plot development, and suspense is effectively created through Tóibín's tightly controlled release of information. This tension between revelation and concealment is sustained throughout the novel thanks to Tóibín's skilful use of a third-person limited point of view where "the only thing that you are told in the book is what this person notices" (Wiesenfarth 15), which makes readers experience the same anxieties and unknowingness as the main characters (e.g., readers accompany Eilis in her gradual realisation of her in-laws' conspiracy against her). Furthermore, in the novel some acts of silence and silencing accurately transmit what is acceptable and/or permissible within society; that is certainly the case for Frank, Tony's brother, whose homosexuality is purposely ignored, even tabooed, for the sake of family unity (just like Eilis herself is silenced, devoid of authority). On the level of characterisation, as Eibhear Walshe perceptively notes, "ambiguity is Tóibín's most empowering emotional texture to explore" (123), and is often linked with his protagonists' most personal, intimate silences–for example, when they are besieged by indecision, remain self-protective or unable to resolve their moral dilemmas, as happens to Jim in the open ending of *Long Island*. Silence, too, works on interpersonal levels; in Tóibín's novel, much is conveyed through gestures and indirection, as well as pauses and moments of reflection and observation, which are interspersed within dialogues. As a strategy for control, silence–for example through evasion, lies and omissions–can be used to deceive and/or subjugate the other (e.g., Francesca's manipulations on Eilis). Alternatively, though, silences can communicate closeness, intimacy, and respect toward the other, as seen in many of the interactions between Jim and Eilis as they rekindle their love relationship from Part Two onwards. All in all, this analysis of Tóibín's *Long Island* has traced the different ways

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in which silence informs narrative style, endows characters with psychological complexity, and enriches the subject matter of the story.

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