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QUEERING HISTORY; CONTEMPORARY IRISH LESBIAN AND GAY WRITING.

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> *Well, Gay liberation is very like Northern Ireland. Once the troubles are over the novelists have a different story to tell – one which isn't intrinsically as dramatic. In a repressive society, every single gay man's story is fascinating* [...] *if you're French, out to everyone, have a nice boyfriend and two dogs, it's intrinsically not as interesting.* (Toibin. 2003: 184)

In this essay, I want to consider Colm Toibin's 2004 historical novel, *The Master* and Emma Donoghue's 2004 historical novel *Lifemask* and ask this question. Ten years after the decriminalisation of male homosexuality in Ireland – is contemporary Irish lesbian and gay fiction (to quote Toibin's words) *intrinsically not as interesting* because it is no longer liminal – at least within literary culture if not in a wider societal sense? Clearly, as I will argue, there is a post-gay moment beyond marginality in contemporary Irish lesbian and gay writing, resulting from cultural legitimisation of Irish literary representations of the homoerotic since decriminalisation? Has the legitimisation of same sex desire 'liberated' imaginings of the homoerotic or, in fact, rendered it less marginal, beyond liminal? As a result, what are the narrative options for the contemporary Irish lesbian or gay novelist?

Before decriminalisation, Irish lesbian and gay writing was, in the words of Gerry Smyth, part of a borderland, an in-between space within Irish writing, without any openly lesbian or gay Irish main-stream writer visibly challenging this liminality in cultural or political discourse. Gerry Smyth's discussion of liminality in the contemporary Irish novel draws on Homi Bhaba to describe "these in-between spaces that provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood – singular or communal – that initiate new signs of identity and innovative sites of collaboration and contestation in the act of defining society itself." (Smyth 1997: 145). I want to explore the idea that a "post-gay" moment in contemporary Irish gay fiction is where new signs of identity are being initiated. When decriminalization took place in 1993, it can be argued that legal change validated the diverse Irish lesbian and gay cultural identities, many of these evolving outside the law throughout the 20th Century. In the ten years or so since law reform, Irish writing has responded to this legal validation with "out" or openly lesbian and gay work from Cathal O'Searcaigh, Emma Donoghue, Jamie O'Neill, Keith Ridgeway, Mary Dorcey and others. In discussing contemporary Irish fiction, Linden Peach argues that "marginal voices question the frames of reference that inform society's narratives about itself"

(Peach 2004: 7) and goes on to remark that "previously marginalized groups, albeit not entirely free of their marginalized social, physical and cultural status, bring about a revisioning of the nation's map in terms of margins and centres" (9). In specific terms, lesbian and gay writing became implicit in these revisionings of the nation's map in the immediate aftermath of decriminalization. Initially, in the mid and late 1990s, there was a polemical urgency for the openly lesbian or gay Irish novelist to the "coming out" novel, for example novels like *Stir Fry* and *When Love Comes to Town*, where the need for a statement of Irish lesbian and gay sexual identity was being addressed. Now that this immediate political moment has passed, this moment for assertion of sexual identity, new versions of Irish lesbian and gay identity are being explored. Now, current preoccupations are being rehearsed using narratives of the past, within the genre of historical fiction. Gerry Smyth has identified that now, the "problem may reside [...] in critical and aesthetic formulations which reflect the perspectives of an established, specifically heterosexual society" (Smyth 1997: 157). Overall I want to read the narrative choices used within each of these 2004 historical novels as critiques of heterosexual aesthetic formulations.

The idea of a queer past or history as a reclaimable or knowable tradition are vital areas for debate within contemporary lesbian or gay scholarship and so I want to contextualise both Toibin and Donoghue within the framework of a tradition of Irish lesbian and gay literary past. Or rather, I want to suggest the lack of such a past, such an identifiable tradition. Although Irish writers and patriots like Casement, Gore Booth, Wilde, O'Brien, and MacLiammoir produced work which troubled the heterosexual consensus of Irish writing, none could afford to do so openly, because of the law. Consider these two utterances on the homoerotic – one by Wilde and the other by Kate O'Brien. Wilde was forced, at his trial to define the Love that Dare not speak its name, at a point of great danger for him and in the face on imminent criminalization:

> "The love that dare not speak its name in this century is such a great affection of an elder for a younger man as there was between David and Jonathan, such as Plato made the very basis for his philosophy and such as you find in the sonnets of Michelangelo and Shakespeare. It is that deep spiritual affection that is as pure as it is perfect […] and, on account of it, I am placed where I am now." (Montgomery Hyde 1962: 201)

Likewise, the only direct reference to homosexuality in her critical writings by the Irish lesbian novelist Kate O'Brien is one where the link between sexual identity and creativity is denied. In her 1937 travel book, she wrote of the painter El Greco in this way: "He is said to have been homosexual, but that suggestion can be of little use to us in considering his work. More mighty than he have been touched with that peculiarity but the residue of all emotional experience tends in spirits large enough to be at last of natural and universal value, whatever the personal accidents of its accretion." (O'Brien 1937:146)

In contrast, since 1993, a number of Irish writers have made their own sexual identity an implicit element within their public persona and, by extension, their own creative voice. Emma Donoghue states that; "on principle, I'm not going to object to 'lesbian writer' if I don't object to 'Irish writer' or 'thirty-something woman writer' since these are all equally descriptive of me and where I come from. And the labels commit me to nothing, of course, my books aren't and don't have to be all about Ireland, or thirty-something women or lesbians" (emmadonoghue.com). Likewise In 1993, the editor of

The London Review of Books asked Colm Toibin to produce a pamphlet "about my own homosexuality. I told him instantly I couldn't do that. It was a matter, I said, which I did not think I could write about […] my sexuality was something about which part of me remained uneasy, timid and melancholy." (Colm Toibin 2002: 1)

Before I consider these two novels, I want to address the question – what is the "post-gay" moment in contemporary writing? Here, I'm drawing on Alan Sinfield's 1998 study, *Gay and After,* where he debates the future for "queer" writing and culture into the new millennium. He addresses the idea of history and of the future and sees a moment of transformation and re-envisioning at hand. In Sinfield's own words,

> If les/bi/gay people have some reason to take the long view of their situation, we know also that, in our current modes, we are a recent and ongoing creation […] We have been making our history and therefore ourselves, though not, of course, in conditions of our own making. Now it seems, we may be growing out of 'gay'. Suddenly, improbably, we are in a position to envisage a new refocusing of sexual dissidence for the new millennium. (Sinfield 1998: 1)

As Sinfield has identified, from the late 1990s onwards, there is a new moment for social formations around sexual difference, resulting in a refashioning of the old dissidence and I would argue that Toibin and Donoghue's historical fictions suggest the transitional nature of that moment by fictionalising history, and in particular, past discourses of homophobia and of sexual repression.

At this point, I want to address the idea of fixed categories of sexual identity, as interrogated and made unstable by the critical perspectives introduced by critics like Foucault and Butler. Both Toibin and Donoghue suggest in their fictions that categories of identity like lesbian and gay are stable and knowable modes of sexual identity, and, that, in times of widespread homophobic panic and political turmoil, such categories become the target for displaced unease and violence within a culture's fault lines. In *Gay and After,* Alan Sinfield argues that these broad cultural categories of gay identity are still presumed to exist within contemporary societies, whatever the literary critics suggest:

> Constructionism, in lesbian and gay thinking, calls for a recognition that categories such as "lesbian", "gay" and "heterosexual" do not demarcate essential differences. They are not intrinsically human and do not represent an individual, ultimately metaphysical, selfhood (like the soul). We may well believe, however, that they do demarcate differences that our societies find necessary in their current formations. And surely that is correct – for to write as though cultural categories were a semiotic game, without location in the actual structures which make some people powerful and others weak […] is to attempt a merely abstract and conservative exercise. […] In the last analysis, our sexual identities are situated at the most sensitive friction points of sexuality, love, gender, power, intimacy, stigma, nakedness, risk and vulnerability. They have been developed in the face of extreme hostility, not just from strangers, but from people we believed we could trust […] In other words they could hardly have a stronger basis in social interaction and in our subjectivities. (Sinfield 1998: 200)

So, Toibin and Donoghue create two historical narratives where the central protagonists are well known London based artists, the writer Henry James and the sculptress Anne Damer, living in societies where any marginal sexuality can have no legitimacy, no permissible expression. Both of these artist figures are of ambiguous or suspect sexuality, working in the public arena and therefore susceptible to rumour, to gossip and to malicious innuendo in the newspapers. Both protagonists conduct their careers in public, creating art in times of political upheaval and, as a consequence, the focus for intense

media attention concerning the private sphere of sexuality. For Toibin and Donoghue, the past is a metaphor for the present, a means by which the present can be re-evaluated.

For Colm Toibin, the homoerotic makes a belated appearance in his fiction. In his earlier novels, *The South* and *The Heather Blazing*, the imaginative context is firmly normative and heterosexual and it is only with his third novel, *The Story of The Night*, that a homoerotic narrative is introduced, albeit displaced onto a South American setting. Finally, in conjunction with his public self-identification as gay, Toibin published his first novel were a contemporary Irish gay identity is represented. However, I would argue that in *The Blackwater Lightship* the homoerotic vanishes as a legitimised gay identity emerges from Irish law. Jennifer M.Jeffers puts it:

> the body severely marked by AIDS is also a body becoming at such great speed that it is imperceptible. Imperceptible, indeed, is Declan. We cannot see him in *The Blackwater Lightship*. In this novel, Declan is imperceptible because Toibin does not allow Declan his own sexuality and his becoming; yet this is not the fault of the author. Rather Declan is unpresentable because socially, culturally and sexually, the reader is not prepared to see him. It is difficult to "represent" the unseen and the unexplored in our society. (Jeffers 2002: 119)

However in Tobin's next novel *The Master*, this does change because Toibin does find a way in which he can allow the homoerotic to reappear, albeit this time, firmly repressed. *The Master* is Toibin's fictionalised account of the life of the American novelist, Henry James, from his middle years onwards in England from 1895 to 1910, precisely the time of the fin de siecle. The narrative is structured around the real incidents in James' own life, in particular his traumatic experience in London as a would-be dramatist with the failure of his play *Guy Domville* in 1895. James is Toibin's study of life in the closet, of a man in late Victorian society carefully monitoring and suppressing his forbidden attraction towards other men while living a successful life of the imagination within mainstream literary life. James' life provides Toibin with the perfect metaphor for his own imaginative sense of the post-gay moment, this repressed life as an image for his own "unease and melancholy". Yet, unlike his apparently more openly gay novel, *The Blackwater Lightship*, the homoerotic does reappear again and again in *The Master*. The older James muses on his youth when, once in Paris, his friend, Paul Joukowsky, writes and invites him up to his hotel room for what is clearly a sexual encounter. Instead, as James remembers, he simply stands on the pavement opposite Paul's hotel for hours and never actually goes in: "He wondered now if these hours were not the truest he had ever lived. The most accurate comparison he could find was with a smooth, hopeful, hushed sea journey, an interlude suspended between two countries, standing there as though floating, knowing that one step would be a step into the impossible, and the vast unknown." (Toibin 2004: 10). The sex James imagines is even more powerful than the sex he might have had.

The turning point in James' life in London comes in April and May 1895 when Oscar Wilde sues the Marquis of Queensbury for libel and the Wilde himself is tried for gross indecency and then sentenced to two years hard labour. Wilde becomes James' nightmare counterpart, a dreaded anti-self, or other publicly exposed as to his erotic interests and thus forced to defend his homosexuality in a court room:

> Everything about Wilde, from the moment Henry had first seen him, even when he had met him in Washington in the house of Clover Adams, suggested deep levels and layers of hiddenness […] He remembered something vague being told to him about Wilde's parents, his mother's madness, or her

> revolutionary spirit, or both, and his father's philandering or perhaps, indeed, his revolutionary spirit. Ireland, he supposed, was too small for someone like Wilde, yet he had always carried a threat of Ireland with him. (71)

James is fascinated and also terrified by Wilde and by any supposed connection that might be made between the two men. (James, like Wilde was of Irish Protestant stock but James kept his Irish ancestry quiet). The lesson of Wilde's disgrace drives James most decisively back into further closeted self-denial:

> The story of Wilde filled Henry's days now. He read whatever came into print about the case and waited for news. He wrote to William about the trial, making clear that he had no respect for Wilde; he disliked both his work and his activities on the stage of London society. Wilde, he insisted, had never been interesting to him, but now, as Wilde threw caution away and seemed ready to make himself into a public martyr, the Irish playwright began to interest him enormously. (73)

As a result, the older James controls any expression of his sexuality most carefully, for example in the case of his attraction towards his Irish servant, Hammond and also his interest in the younger sculptor, Henrick Andersen. James succeeds in controlling any outward interest or surveillance of his sexuality, in a society where all sexual liaisons are under scrutiny. James' life is made subservient to his art and his repression, it is implied, serves his fiction well. Toibin himself makes it clear that he feels a generation separation from the concept of a post-decriminalised Irish gay identity. In his own words:

> It's all changing now. In Keith Ridgeway's the Long Falling, the gay characters have a wonderfully easy time in Dublin. They try to liberate the older generation. I thought that was all interesting. Emma Donoghue, similarly, has a much more open universe. I'm just slightly too old to have experienced that liberation so that it fundamentally entered my spirit. (Toibin 2003: 202)

For Emma Donoghue, born in Dublin in 1969 and first published in 1994, the fictive exploration of a contemporary Irish lesbian identity has been the most innovative feature of her first two novels. Unlike Toibin, a "queer" identity is central to her fictions from the start with her coming out novel. When Emma Donoghue, already a literary critic and a cultural historian, published her first novel *Stir-fry* in 1994, she did so as an openly lesbian Irish writer. Apart from Mary Dorcey, Emma Donoghue was the first openly Irish lesbian writer and this was a radical departure within 20th century Irish writing. Since then, in her more recent fiction, she has extended the range and the form of her imaginative preoccupations with a movement towards the past and towards historical fiction. Drawing on her experience as a literary critic and an historian of early modern sexual identities, she has created powerful historical fictions of 18th century England. In the genre of historical fiction, representations of the past are usually meditations of the nature of the quotidian and I would argue that Donoghue is using the 18th century as the imaginative arena for her last two novels to shift her fictive range away from the immediacies of a politicized literary identity.

Before this, lesbian identity within Irish writing had been, to say the least, liminal. In "Occupied Country: the negotiation of lesbianism in Irish feminist narrative" (Eire/Ireland, Spring 1996), Kathryn Conrad contends that within Irish writing to that point:

> The feminist and queer/positive response to occluding or silencing narratives, however, has too often been similarly contained through an implicit acceptance of "appropriate" or "significant" topics sanctioned by the patriarchal state; in the public sphere, "war" and "government" or in the private sphere, heterosexual romance and personal enlightenment. Resistance means finding new ways to approach narrative, rather than repeating the narrowly focused, carefully contained narrative that ultimately reproduce hierarchies of "importance". (Conrad 1996: 135)

Donoghue's writings from 1994 onwards have indeed suggested a whole range of new ways in which to approach narrative from the perspective of an Irish lesbian sensibility. Her fictions have drawn upon a range of narrative forms, for example the coming-out novel, the fictive meditation on death and bereavement, the historical novel and all of these forms have functioned as parables for the nature of lesbian sexuality and for discourses around contemporary homophobia and female entrapment.

In her latest novel, *Life Mask*, published in 2004 and set in the year's 1787 to1797, she uses her research on lesbian and gay history to draw a portrait of a homophobic society and of an earlier lesbian selfhood. Her central character is the real life Anne Damer, sister of the Duchess of Richmond, well connected in Georgian aristocratic society and a sculptress of note. The novel examines Anne Damer's relationship with Eliza Farren the Irish actress – now the familiar triangular relationship is between the lesbian Anne Damer, the heterosexual Eliza Farren and Lord Derby, the wealthy nobleman who aspires to marry the working woman Eliza Farren. The developing friendship between Anne Damer and the young actress abruptly ends when the following anonymous poem is circulated and printed, hinting at Damer's sapphism

Her little stock of private fame
Will fall a wreck to public clamour,
If Farren leagues with one whose name
Comes near – aye- very near – to DAMN HER

Farren, whose life as a popular actress places her firmly in the public eye, is a woman of strict and formidable personal integrity and virtue, sought in marriage by the Earl of Derby. Afraid for her reputation, she cuts Anne Damer out of her life. Damer, shocked and terrified, begins to question her own sexuality and the novel ends with the marriage of Lord Derby and Eliza Farren and the coming-out of Anne Damer. Interestingly this is Donoghue's most sustained examination of the effects of a public atmosphere of homophobia on a private life, seen in the conjunction between straight and lesbian desire. Clear historical parallels are drawn here with media hysteria in England at this time of revolution in France and contemporary North American pressure of public opinion and hysteria against same sex passion in the wake of 9/11. (At one point, the phrase "Homeland Security" is used by one of the 18th century English newssheets!). Because of the pressure of political turmoil from abroad, English aristocratic society is the focus for public attack and a fault line within this culture is the notion of same sex desire between women, a time when so-called "tommys" or sapphists are ridiculed and attacked. The life mask is the mask of the closet and when Anne Damer confronts her private and public demons, she realises that the slander is true and claims the name of sapphist for herself, finding a life-long partnership with Mary Berry. So, unlike Toibin's James, the artist figure confronts homophobia, claims a same sex partner and continues to create.

To conclude, both Toibin and Donoghue find history to be a useful imaginative arena in which to debate current Irish gay selfhoods, but with very different results. As Tobin has written "the idea that gay writing has a tendency to deal with the tragic and the unfulfilled, a tendency which Forster and writers after Stonewall sought to counter-act, has echoes in Irish writing […] This truth may change, of course, as gay lives changes and Ireland changes' (Toibin 2002: 26).

Some of the materials in this essay draw on my published work in *The Fictions of Emma Donoghue.* The UCD Aesthetic Ed Anthony Roche.(Dublin:New Island Books, 2005) and *Colm Tóibín's Gay Fictions'*, New Hibernia Review 10.4 Winter 2006.

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