This is the published version (version of record) of:
Devlin-Glass, Frances 2010-12, Book review: The silence of the lambs, Tinteán, pp. 30-30.

http://hdl.handle.net/10536/DRO/DU:30034509

Reproduced with the specific permission of the copyright owner.

Copyright: 2010, Australian Irish Heritage Network
The Silence of the Lambs


I usually enjoy Tóibín immoderately, so it’s sad to report that this short novel was a tad disappointing. It’s a migration novel, and at that level it works best. It is a moving account of a young woman silently pressured by her widowed mother and dying sister, who are complicit with a meddling priest, to emigrate to the US in the ‘50s. Eilis is a passive creature who allows herself to be quietly exported, one realises in retrospect, by loving kinsfolk who feel, without consulting her, that she will have economic advantages in New York. The silence is terrifying in this novel, and of a piece with what the sociologists tell us about emotional reticence/stoicism of the Irish. Tóibín does not spare us the anguish, and it is the more unbearable because unspoken: the girl is aware that the mother’s expression is like that when she buried her husband; the child is the ghost at her own funeral. ‘...[They] could do everything except say out loud what it was they were thinking’ (p.31).

The novel invites you into this mindset to feel its consequences. The leave taking, which breaks all their hearts, is typically stoic, and when the sister unexpectedly dies, tragic in its consequences. Something of the thinking behind this emotional impoverishment, is suggested by a passage about a pregnant girl out of the boarding house in disgrace and silently so as not to give scandal to the other girls. The landlady advises Eilis:

She’s very West-of-Ireland and they’re better at saying nothing than we are. So it suits her because she doesn’t have to say any farewells. (p.96)

What Tóibín does best is to evoke the narrowness of ‘50s Ireland, its taken-for-granted moralistic rigours, and its petty cruelties. In a nightmare, Eilis shrinks from the experience of court-house days in Enniscorthy. The routine exposure of the small town drunks, petty thieves and those convicted of disorderly behaviour, in a small community, is bad enough. The seismic shocks and shame of children suddenly being taken into ‘care’ into the industrial schools and foster homes because they’d ‘mitched from school or caused trouble or because of problems with their parents’ (p.67) appails her. There is a wealth of social history and depth of feeling compressed into such a lamentable set of criteria, the more so that we now know a lot more about such institutions and the level of care on offer in that period.

Tóibín’s prose is famously spare. In earlier novels, this makes for the most economical and symbolic of poetry. The crumbling cliffs of Wexford are powerfully evocative in The Heather Blazing, but insofar as there is poetry in Brooklyn, it’s reserved for trivialities like nylons and the wonder of them, the furnishings of the basement room, and the flavours of Italian spaghetti. In other words, in the world with which Tóibín is less familiar, Brooklyn, the prose becomes the stuff of Hollywood cliché. The American section loses the edge of critique that I expect from Tóibín. It occasionally gathers pace and intensity, usually when he is recreating the Irish ghetto experiences of the period, as for example, the music that follows the charity Christmas lunch. Fr. Flood who min-

ists to his flock in a paternalistic and meddlesome manner, and who is the spring of the action of the novel, might have been foregrounded more in the interests of building tension in the American section.

Without spoiling it for those who have not read it, I found the complications Tóibín introduces in the last quarter of the novel utterly unconvincing. Eilis’ silence about her American boyfriend in the face of rediscovering her transformed Irish one has been prepared for, and is not surprising. We are also privy to her growing self-confidence and Americanisation, so it comes as something of a relief when the passive girl makes her own choices at the end of the novel.

I hope that Tóibín is not losing his touch. Perhaps taking on a culture, and a gendered point of view that he’s not familiar with has taken the edge off his prose. Let’s hope this one is a temporary aberration, and that the Tóibín we know and love will soon burst upon the literary horizon again. The best parts of this novel reveal him to be a subtle exponent of pre-Celtic Tiger Ireland and its moral pathologies, and a fine documenter of the Irish migration to America in the 1950s.

Frances Devlin-Glass
Frances Devlin-Glass is the president of AIHIN, publisher of Tinteán