

Embodying the mother, disembodied the icon: Female resistance in Colm Tóibín's *The Testament of Mary*

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I am sure
The body of an ageing woman
Is a memory
Eavand Boland "Anna Liffey" (1994, 45)

The classical Cartesian dualism body/mind has informed much of Western thought since the 17th century and it has also served to validate unbalanced dichotomies, especially those associated with gender roles, which placed women closer to the body or to emotions, and men closer to reason. In their refusal to endorse this reductionism, feminist scholars have been at pains to redefine biased ideological positions and have articulated discourses that delved into the blurring of boundaries of such artificial categories. Besides, recent discoveries in neuroscience have confirmed the linkage of body and mind, suggesting that emotions and feelings, even more than reason, shape our decision-making processes, our consciousness and, therefore, our daily lives. In Colm Tóibín's *The Testament of Mary* ([2012] 2013b), a subversive revision of one of the most emblematic symbols of Catholicism, the Passion of Christ, a grieving Mary recollects the last days of her son's life more than twenty years after his death. Questioning the validity of the Gospels as given truths and refusing to collaborate with the apostles to confirm their version, she vindicates her authority to testify as a witness and give voice to her own experience after years of resisting silence and exile. In so doing, she does not accept to endorse the received image of herself as an atemporal, iconic symbol of a sacrificing mother and defends the authority of her narrative, her Testament to the world.

The cult of the Virgin Mary, the Mariology, and its ideological implications for the cultural construction of female silence and motherly sacrifice, are the main targets of Tóibín's criticism. Engaged in the rendering of a more human version of a flesh and blood woman, he challenges centuries of appropriation and recreation. In her reverie, an agentive and gendered Mary gives shape to her consciousness by means of an unorthodox account that relies on the emotions felt by her body,

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historically absent in official records. Bearing these aspects in mind, this discussion intends to explore Mary's resistant narrative against misrepresentation, probing into the function of the body as text. Its fundamental role in the shaping of consciousness will ultimately contribute to dissolve traditional binaries as regards body/mind and reason/emotion. I will argue that the reliance on emotions and feelings as catalysts of memory places her healing account within a therapeutic framework that, in turn, provides a secure space from which she can redeem herself and grieve the loss of her son. To this end, I will rely on the theories of neuroscientist and clinical psychologist Antonio Damasio, who argues that emotions are located in the body, whereas feelings and thoughts emerge at a further stage in the cognitive process, as he has demonstrated in influential works such as *Descartes' Error* (1994), *The Feeling of What Happens* (1999) and *Looking for Spinoza* (2003). This reading will eventually attempt to place Tóibín's controversial *The Testament of Mary* as a text that writes women's bodies and female selves back in history, challenging the received accounts that have fueled Christian imagery and have sculpted western thought.

RECEPTION AND GENESIS OF *THE TESTAMENT*

Originally written for the stage, the monologue *The Testament* was produced for the Dublin Theatre Festival in 2011. Later staged in Brooklyn as a dramatic solo play, with the full title *The Testament of Mary*, it triggered unfavorable reactions and controversy (Shea 2012; Oppenheimer 2012). Despite positive reviews and three Tony Awards nominations, it was closed five months later due to poor ticket sales (Pinsker 2013). In the following years, it was produced by the most emblematic theater halls with enormous success, including Dublin, London, New York, Montreal or Toronto. Tóibín's ensuing adaptation of Mary's reverie in the form of the novella *The Testament of Mary* ([2012] 2013b) was equally received as a blasphemous account (Pinsker 2013) and as an engaging exercise in revising established interpretations of a sacred text (Boland 2012; Charles 2012; Gordon 2012). While some critics could see its value "as an example of rewriting, of hypertextual 'transposition' [...] an exercise in 'transvalorisation,' [...] in giving voice to a previously marginalised character" (Kusek 2014, 82), some conservative members of the Catholic community interpreted it as blasphemous and heretical, and demonstrated in the streets when it was staged in New York. (A similar case had happened years before when Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988) and Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* (2004) premiered.) Despite such polarized reactions, it was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize in 2013.

Though the text clearly resonates with Irish Catholicism, readers who are familiar with Tóibín's work could also recognize one of his most prominent themes, the mother-son relationship which, in this case, went beyond the largely problematized bond. In an article published in *The Guardian* soon after the novella came out, the author described its sources and acknowledged having been deeply inspired by two Renaissance paintings that he admired while in a trip to Venice. On the one hand, Titian's *The Assumption of the Virgin* (1516–1518) pictured the Virgin Mary ascending to heaven in the company of the angels, whilst the apostles were kneeling down

in prayer and raising their hands to the sky in full awe. On the other, Tintoretto's *The Crucifixion* (1565) bestowed a terrifying view of the pain and suffering of Christ on Calvary, with his mother lying at his feet, amidst a violent landscape of fear, menace and death. The contrast between the two images struck Tóibín, who saw: "One pure, the way they wanted her to be, arising into heaven; and the other impure, chaotic, cruel, strange, unforgettable," and came to realize that such "transformation fulfilled a pictorial need, or a storyteller's need, as much as it did anything else" (2012, n.p.). Hence, the interpretative potential of the figure of Mary, triggered by the gap that existed between the limited space she occupies in the gospels and the paramount significance she had acquired for the Catholic faith, was the basis for the writing of *The Testament*.

Being both mother and virgin, as José Carregal-Romero has noted, "as the epitome of purity and ideal femininity, [she] has traditionally served both as a figure of worship and also as an oppressive cultural artifact in order to control women's sexuality" (2013, 92). Thus, grounded on this contradiction of a flesh and blood mother who gives birth to a holy baby, Tóibín's narrative dissolves the historical conundrum of such an in-between space, subverting a culturally constructed notion of motherhood that embodied "centuries of sentimentality – blue and white Madonnas with folded hands and upturned eyes, a stick with which to beat independent women" (Gordon 2012, n.p.). However, precisely the gulf that separates Tóibín's empowered mother from the faultless and atemporal Virgin Mary of the Gospels was at the core of much of the debate surrounding the novel, which can be summarized in the following statement: "I don't want a Mary this contemporary and human – just as I do not want a Jesus who hikes up his shorts" (Oppenheimer 2012, n.p.). Yet, as Michael Fontaine argues, placing the focus on Mary's more human nature is where Tóibín's success lies, as it redeems a "culturally overdetermined image of Mary as a symbol of divine purity" and furthermore exemplifies "human benevolence encouraged by religious teaching" (2017, n.p.).

MARY'S ACCOUNT AND VALIDATION OF THE TRUTH

The Testament starts twenty years after the death of her son when an ageing Mary, exiled in Ephesus and retained in her own home by two guardians – seemingly the apostles John and Luke – with "a brutality boiling in their blood" (Tóibín 2013b, 3), refuses to validate their version of Truth.¹ Even though she cannot read or write, she is aware of the power of narratives to shape cultural beliefs and refuses to be reduced to a historical icon constructed out of polyphonic versions of her life, except her own: "They want to make what happened alive for ever, they told me. What is being written down, they say, will change the world" (99). Defending her right to speak the truth and to be the only reliable narrator, she gives voice to her experience as mother, woman and witness of the events, digging into her memories and offering an alternative more maternal and human storyline in the form of a legacy to the world. Her testament is therefore a resistance narrative against silence and forgetting, whose healing potential eventually grants her a space to properly deal with resentment, pain and grief. As the narrative stylization of the character

foregrounds its fictional nature, Tóibín's text deftly manages the suspension of disbelief, having Mary often comment on the constructive quality of stories and their ability to manipulate reality. Presenting herself as the only administrator of the doses of truth that she will reveal to the world, the reader is led into the belief that, since her narration is based on her real involvement, her account is more valid and authentic. As Mary Gordon puts it: "She sees herself as a victim, trapped by men determined to make a story of what she knows is not a story but her life. The making of the Gospels is portrayed not as an act of sacred remembrance but as an invasion and a theft" (2012, n.p.). More so, this Mary not only uses the power of her voice to rebel against her historical muteness, but she also has a body, that is, a text that demands to be read. Such weight placed on the representation of a flesh and blood woman, a personified subversion of the atemporal, pure and sexless Catholic icon, undermines the debate on the division of body and mind, from which the present proposal takes its cue.

ANTONIO DAMASIO'S NEUROBIOLOGY OF EMOTIONS

The classical dichotomy of body/mind, or matter/spirit, which can be traced back to pre-Aristotelian philosophy and reached its peak in Cartesian thought, has been the source of endless debates throughout history. Dualism and monism have prevailed as two positions from which to explain the realms of body, matter, mind or brain, and of corporeal and spiritual reality. Dualists have traditionally maintained that reason was located in the mind, whereas emotions and feelings were sensed by the body, a separation that current research in neuroscience has proved wrong, evidencing their complementary nature. Additionally, western religions have fostered the separation between the corporeal, temporal and sinful body from the atemporal, sinless and spiritual soul. Even though in recent decades, scientific advances have demonstrated that their link is unquestionable, controversy remains as regards the role of each one in the shaping of consciousness. From this angle, the theories of the neurobiological basis of emotions and feelings proposed by the internationally recognized North American and Portuguese leader in neuroscience, Antonio Damasio, might enlighten a reading of *The Testament*, a narrative that locates emotions and memory in the body. His research, which has proved both revolutionary and divisive,² has helped to elucidate the biological basis of the emotions and has shown how these play a central role in individual social cognition and in decision-making processes. His work has also exerted a major influence in our current understanding of the neural system, closely connected to the cognitive processes involved in memory, language and consciousness, which he defines "as the critical biological function that allows us to know sorrow or know joy, to know suffering or know pleasure, to sense embarrassment or pride, to grieve for lost love or lost life" (1999, 4).

In one of his key texts, *The Feeling of What Happens. Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness* (1999), Damasio distinguishes different phases in the manifestations of emotions and feelings: a stimulus triggers a reaction in the body, which is registered at a neural level, forms a neurological pattern, a somatic marker, and starts a physiological process that gives way to an emotion. The brain,

which “is truly the body’s captive audience” (150), cognitively maps the expression of this emotion and represents it through feelings.³ So, for him, emotions precede feelings, are placed in the body and are experienced, whereas feelings are produced by the mind at a further step in the cognitive process.⁴ Hence, since conscience and subjectivity are the result of awareness, they necessarily rely on the body, connecting emotional processing and decision-making. In his own words: “I separate three stages of processing along a continuum: a state of emotion, which can be triggered and executed nonconsciously; a state of feeling, which can be represented nonconsciously; and a state of feeling made conscious, i.e., known to the organism having both emotion and feeling” (37).⁵ Arguing that his approach to emotions and feelings is “unorthodox” because “there is no central feeling state before the respective emotion occurs” and “that reflection on feeling is yet another step up,” he ends up suggesting that bodily symptoms are not the result of emotions but the other way round (186–187). In fact, he follows psychologist William James, who had postulated a century earlier in his *Principles of Psychology* (1890), that “bodily changes follow directly the perception of the exciting fact, and that our feeling of the same changes as they occur IS [sic] the emotion” (Vol. 2, 449). This means that, for instance, we do not cry because we are sad, but quite the reverse, we are sad because we cry. As Steven Johnson further explains, Damasio’s research had somehow evidenced and offered “an updated version of James who, famously argued in the late 1800 that emotions were simply a readout of the body’s physiological state” (2004, 47).⁶ In a clear nod to James, Tóibín has Mary affirm in the novel that: “There are tears if you need them enough. It is the body that makes tears” (2013b, 4).

MARY’S CORPOREAL ACCOUNT: THE BODY AS TEXT

That the body matters in Tóibín’s text seems certain from the moment Mary initiates her reverie asserting that: “Memory fills my body as much as blood and bones” (4). Damasio believes that there are three different phenomena: an emotion registered in the body, the feeling of an emotion, and knowing that we have the feeling of an emotion, and the three are present in Mary’s account. In fact, following his claim that “emotions use the body as their theatre” (1999, 8, 51) to probe into Mary’s narrative of resistance against a made-up version of her life might shed some light into how the somatic memory informs her discourse.⁷ Since the act of remembering involves a sensation attached to it, the role of emotions is central to the shaping of memory and, by extension, of consciousness. The self does not exist outside its mental processes, in truth, maps of how the body and the external world function.⁸ Accordingly, recalled with a span of twenty years and writing back in anger for the way her fabricated identity has satisfied religious beliefs, Mary navigates her body through her resentment for a son who had turned away from her, transforming this initial narrative of resistance into one of repair, allowing her to redeem her own seemingly (un)motherly choices and lack of unconditional love. The way her memories activate and evoke the states of her body is explained by how these responses had been registered at a neural level, creating mental images that are recalled later: “Feeling an emotion consists of having mental images

arising from neural patterns which represent the changes in the body and brain that make up an emotion” (280).

As underlined above, Mary is not merely an empowered agentive woman, but a flesh and blood character who reaffirms herself physically and ideologically through her body-text. She both occupies a place and bids to be read, enacting an act of writing back against her appropriation. The way she defends her space, violated by the two guardians who keep her captive, is paramount for her existence, and she does not doubt to threaten them with a knife when they try to use an empty chair, her husband's, whose absence yet inhabits a space: “It was to be left unused. It belongs to memory, it belongs to a man who will not return, whose body is dust but who once held sway in the world. He will not come back” (Tóibín 2013b, 19). Filling the gaps left by centuries of omission and misrepresentation involves her in a double act of subversion, through her body as text, and through her deviation from a given truth that has shaped Christian belief. Meaningfully, *The Testament* brims with references to blood, inner organs, veins, bones and other corporeal parts, often evoking images of violence and death.⁹ Given the number of allusions to blood, its significance as a trope for female blood and womanhood deserve to be commented upon. In fact, Mary is puzzled by the disciples' assumption of her virginity, when she considers herself a flesh and blood woman and mother, who has, in fact, shared her blood with her son in pregnancy.¹⁰ In her pretension to stand for a real being, Tóibín creates a new subjectivity for her and makes Mary compare her struggle to recall reliable memories to the existence of her hands, arms or other parts of her body, insisting that she only relies on what she can see and feel, even though in the realm of the narration, the fictive historical character as much as her body occupy the same ontological space. For this reason, Mary does not merely have a body but signifies through her body. Moreover, at the end of the narration, when she foresees her death, she also wishes her body would be taken care of: “in those days after he was born, when I held him and watched him, my thoughts included the thought that I would have someone to watch over me when I was dying to look after my body when I had died” (74).

The fact that Mary's corporeal account largely rests on what can be seen or experienced, in strict terms, on the matter, has further implications for the rejection of miraculous and spiritual explanations that have constituted the bases of Christian belief. In her narration, Mary not only surfaces as a woman and a mother in full human sight, but she also refuses to see her son in any other form than as a rebellious young man with leading skills, capable of moving crowds. She makes clear that those who claimed that he could walk on water, calm strong winds, transform water into wine or perform miracles were just crafting stories that circulated and to which she paid little attention: “For those who gathered and gossiped it was a high time, filled with rumours and fresh news, filled with stories both true and wildly exaggerated. I lived mostly in silence” (56). Dismissing his deeds, miracles and spiritual self means that there is no room for worship. Tellingly, she is a pagan woman who keeps a small statue of Artemis at home, the Greek goddess of animals and fertility – who ironically was never a mother – to whom she prays because she finds more truth in her

than in the God of the Christians. In fact, the novella ends with her final invocation of Artemis: "I speak to her in whispers, the great goddess Artemis, bountiful with her arms outstretched and her many breasts waiting to nurture those who come towards her. I tell her how much I long now to sleep in the dry earth, to go to dust peacefully" (103).

A turning point in the novel in this regard is the scene of the resurrection of Lazarus, which a skeptical Mary disparages on account of an ethics of care and the need of the diseased body to be respected and left alone. Once Jesus and his followers arrive at Lazarus's tomb four days after his death, the crowd brings news of how he was able to turn a blind man to see and produce food out of nothing. So, when he makes Lazarus's dead body come to life, Mary can only see him suspended in limbo, in an in-between space between life and death, unable to utter a word or to sustain his decaying body: "They felt, as I felt, as I still feel, that no one should tamper with the fullness that is death. Death needs time and silence. The death must be left alone with their new gift or their new freedom from affliction" (31). Accordingly, and in opposition to the rest of witnesses, Mary is disturbed by the apparent possibility of being raised from death and focuses on the unnatural physiological reaction of the body: "his howls in the hour before dawn harrowed up the soul of anyone who heard them" (63), rather than on its miraculous quality.

In addition, the harrowing scenes of the suffering of her son, against the admiration and wonder of his followers, are also worth commenting upon. During Jesus's trial as the King of the Jews, the horns of his crown make him bleed so much that there is a violent outcry: "I sensed a thirst for blood among the crowd" (69), which "had reached every single person there just as blood pumped from the heart makes its way inexorably to every part of the body" (70). However, at that intense emotional moment, Mary's narration diverts to her aching feet from walking in the heat, placing her body at the forefront of her account: "every body's blood was filled with venom, a venom which came in the guise of energy, activity, shouting, laughing, roaring instructions [...]. And it was strange too the fact that my shoes hurt me, that they were not made for this bustle and this heat, preyed on my mind sometimes as a distraction from what was really happening" (74). The significant shift of attention from the body of her son, the object of the gaze, to her own body, the subject who gazes, make her more physically present: "All the worry, all the shock, seemed to focus on a point in my chest" (74), establishing "a nexus between an object and an emotional body state" (Damasio 1994, 132). And yet again, the body is the focus of the narration in the description of Jesus's crucifixion and his violent disfigurement. While watching the horror of how he is being nailed to the cross, Mary recalls being unable to recognize him: "I tried to see his face as he screamed in pain, but it was so contorted in agony and covered in blood that I saw no one I recognized. It was the voice I recognized, the sounds he made that belonged only to him" (Tóibín 2013b, 76). Fully detached, her body displays no reaction, in contrast to the widespread Christian imagery that pictures a devastated Mary held by other women in unbearable pain. At the end of her narration, the final confession of a faulty, imperfect mother, explains her actions:

For years I have comforted myself with the thought of how long I remained there, how much I suffered then. But I must say it at once, I must let the words out, that despite the panic, despite the desperation, the shrieking, despite the fact that his heart and his flesh had come from my heart and my flesh, [...] despite all of this, the pain was his and not mine. And when the possibility of being dragged away and choked arose, my first instinct was to flee and it was also my last instinct. In those hours I was powerless [...]. As our guardian said, I would leave others to wash his body and hold him and bury him when his death came. I would leave him to die alone if I had to. And that is what I did. (84)

THE MOTHER-SON RELATIONSHIP

At this point, it needs to be stressed how cold, detached and abject mothers have populated Tóibín's novels, unresolved mother-son relationships being one of his most recurrent themes.¹¹ In *The Testament*, Mary's bitterness towards her son works at two levels. On the one hand, as a mother who must come to terms with her failed efforts to protect and control his wanderings, mixing with other young men whom she only sees as misfits, and especially, to accept his self-sufficiency and independence. Thus, her grief is problematized by her anomalous loss: for the vulnerable child that she had lost when he claimed to be the son of God and for the real man who died at the cross. Jesus's actual denial of his mother and his mortal origin is described in the Gospels, in his famous sentence at the wedding of Cana: "Woman, what have I to do with thee?" (John 2:4; Tóibín 2013b, 47). Claiming that his holy mission was to bring the reign of God upon earth, the Virgin Mary wordlessly accepts such sacred destiny, embodying the universal symbol of the sacrificial and sorrowful mother of us all.¹² Subverting centuries of idealized sainthood, the flesh and blood Mary of Tóibín's text refuses to admit his divine origin and voices her resentment for his son's absence of memory and for the historical silencing of women:

And then time created the man who sat beside me at the wedding feast of Cana, the man not heeding me, hearing no one, a man filled with power, a power that seemed to have no memory of years before, when he needed my breast for milk, my hand to help steady him as he learned to walk, or my voice to soothe him to sleep. (54)

Denied as a mother, since she has no mothering role to perform any more, she refuses to be one of his followers, worship him or believe in his miracles. In fact, she instead refers to them as "stories – narratives which might well have been inspired by true events, but which, like any work of memory, fail to pass the test of veracity and are shaped to suit various, often conflicted and contradictory demands" (Kusek 2014, 84).¹³

On the other hand, Mary's reverie also hinders at her own bitterness for having failed to remain at his side when he was dying, letting others wash and bury his body, affirming at the end of the text that she "fled before it was over" and that "when you say that he redeemed the world, I will say that it was not worth it. It was not worth it" (Tóibín 2013b, 102). Elderly, in exile and seeking redemption, she dwells on the justification of her apparently cold decision to protect her own life and run away. Such a problematic ending has led critics to see Mary as a traumatized subject. Carregal-Romero, for instance, identifies it in the grief, sorrow and regret of her "witnessing the brutal execution of her son whilst being unable to offer any help or

consolation” (2013, 93) and Rosemary Rizq pictures a “Mary tortured by her failure to save Jesus from his fate. She is guarded by two disciples of Jesus who are engaged in the onerous task of writing down a record of what happened to her son” (2019, 614). However, my sustained argument is that she is extraordinarily articulate, retains a full account of her memories – her own narrative – and is utterly connected to her body, an empowered weapon with which she refuses to endorse the story of the redemption of humankind through values of suffering, sacrifice and death. Against the unspeakable as a construct that permeates trauma narratives, she affirms: “I remember too much; [...]. As the world holds its breath, I keep memory in [...] the details of what I told him were with me all the years in the same way as my hands or my arms were with me” (Tóibín 2013b, 5). As Damasio has asserted, “consciousness feels like some kind of pattern built with the non-verbal signs of body states” (1999, 312). Not only does she have a language, but she also has a corporeal consciousness and recalls having a body that speaks volumes against so much silence and oblivion. That is how her initial narrative of resistance translates into a narrative of healing, a true testament to the world that writes back centuries of unquestioned beliefs. Indeed, some decades ago, the Irish writer Edna O’Brien had also aptly defended the bases of female corporeality, explaining that: “The body was as sacred as a tabernacle and everything a potential occasion of sin. It is funny now, but not that funny – the body contains the life story just as much as the brain. I console myself by thinking that if one part is destroyed another flourishes” (quoted in Roth 1984).

CONCLUSION

To conclude, it would be pertinent to evoke Simone de Beauvoir’s affirmation in *The Second Sex* that “to be present in the world implies strictly that there exists a body which is at once a material thing in the world and a point of view towards the world” (1953, 39). Through Mary’s corporeal narration fixed to a time and place, Tóibín subverts the atemporal iconographic symbology of the Virgin Mary that has rendered mothers invisible and silent throughout centuries. *The Testament of Mary* is the flesh and body account of a mother who has lost her son to save humanity and who finds such effort and sacrifice worthless. Through an empowered voice, her resistant narrative refuses to be appropriated in mind or body, letting her son’s disciples validate a story that texturizes in the Gospels. Rejecting to endorse the official version of both her story and her son’s, she offers an alternative pagan narration, claiming to have the authority to speak the truth, as she was the most important witness to the events. Tóibín’s version of the Passion of Christ, therefore, succeeds at transforming the iconic virginal, voiceless, sexless and static image of the Virgin Mary into an aging, gendered body in pain that reclaims her own space in the narration and, ultimately, in history. Her last words are eloquent: “And I am whispering the words, knowing that words matter, and smiling as I say them to the shadows of the gods of this place who linger in the air to watch me and hear me” (2013b, 104). As the author himself has explained: “I wanted to create a mortal woman, someone who has lived in the world. Her suffering would have to be real, her memory exact, her tone urgent [...]. She would have to have grandeur in her tone as well as deep fragility” (2013a, n.p.).

NOTES

- ¹ In the narration, she refuses to address her son by his name: “I cannot say the name, it will not come, something will break in me if I say the name. So we call him ‘him’, ‘my son’, ‘our son’, ‘the one who was here’, ‘your friend’, ‘the one you are interested in’. Maybe before I die I will say the name or manage on one of those nights to whisper it but I do not think so” (9).
- ² As his theory of the mind is non-cognitivist, in the sense that it explains mental states through the monitoring process of bodily and behavioural responses, his ideas have been contested by cognitive psychology, a model which argues that emotions also involve evaluation and representation in the mind.
- ³ For Damasio, feelings do not exist without a mind that processes them: “Someone may suggest that perhaps we should have another word for ‘feelings that are not conscious’, but there isn’t one” (37).
- ⁴ In Damasio’s words: “I have proposed that the term *feeling* should be reserved for the private, mental experience of an emotion, while the term *emotion* should be used to designate the collection of responses, many of which are publicly observable” (42).
- ⁵ Arguably, his theory is much more complex than what the limits of space allow me to discuss here. For instance, it is important to add that Damasio also believed that consciousness has two levels: core and extended. While the first one is shared with other animals, the second depends on memory and language (16).
- ⁶ These findings have been backed up by evolutionary evidence. Risking an oversimplification of a much more complex process, I will only underline that science has shown that the amygdala, responsible for the expression of emotions, is an older part of the brain, while consciousness and rationality, which require the functioning of higher brain areas, developed at a later stage in evolution of human beings.
- ⁷ Damasio’s somatic marker finds an equivalent in somatic memory, a term that has been applied to literature mainly in trauma studies to foreground the role of the body in tackling the inarticulate, demonstrating the existence of a somatic corporeal memory that precedes suppressed or blocked cognitive processes.
- ⁸ For Damasio, the brain works like a cartographer, forming representations and revealing how: “Consciousness is rooted in the representation of the body” (1994, 37).
- ⁹ Her descriptions are so physical that she even recalls smells: “And then he went, and, perhaps because there had been no one in this house for so long, he left behind a smell of pure unease” (60).
- ¹⁰ Watching her son bleed at the Temple, Mary reflects: “In those days if I had even dreamed that I would see him bloody, and the crowd around filled with zeal that he should be bloodied more, I would have cried out as I cried out that day and the cry would have come from a part of me that is the core of me. The rest of me is merely flesh and blood and bone” (74).
- ¹¹ Besides being an underlying theme in many of his novels, Tóibín has also addressed this issue in works, such as *New Ways to Kill Your Mother: Writers and Their Families* (2012) or his earlier collection *Mothers and Sons* (2006). See Fogarty (2008), Costello-Sullivan (2012), Morales-Ladrón (2013) or Walshe (2013) for further insights.
- ¹² For a thorough Kristevan analysis of the concept of the “Mater Dolorosa”, see Bruzelius, who argues that the powerful symbol of the Virgin Mary “pervades western consciousness, even in Protestant and secular manifestations. It is difficult to ignore her” (1999, 215).
- ¹³ Interestingly, also, at the wedding, when Jesus transforms water into wine, Mary mentions that the first container did have water, but that she was not sure about the others, questioning the authenticity of the miracle. Using it as a metaphor for truth, Tóibín is also suggesting that in the same way that the water was transformed into wine, the writers of the scriptures could have changed the story for their own benefit.

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Embodying the mother, disembodiment the icon: Female resistance in Colm Tóibín's *The Testament of Mary*

The Passion of Christ. Mary. Religion. Corporeality. Mother. Icon. Colm Tóibín.

Informed by the theories of Antonio Damasio on the emotional mappings of the mind, the present article probes into the Irish writer Colm Tóibín's *The Testament of Mary* (2012), originally written for the stage as a solo play and later adapted into a novella, to disclose the resistance narrative of a grieving mother against the official accounts of the Passion of Christ. The ageing Mary of this text, who is granted voice and body, defies the symbolic representations of female suffering and sorrow that have nurtured cultural history and memory for centuries, and engages in a corporeal rendering of her version, which she intends to leave as her Testament to the world. The shaping of her consciousness is thus substantiated on her embodiment as woman and mother, against the iconic disembodied Virgin Mary that has formed the axis of the Catholic cult of Mariology, ultimately contributing to dissolve the classical dichotomies body/mind and matter/spirit, which will be analyzed in depth.

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