



# “GRAFTING” HOPE: THE ETHICS OF REWRITING IN COLM TÓIBÍN’S HOUSE OF NAMES

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**Abstract:** Exploring the particularities of rewriting in Irish contemporary fiction through an analysis of Colm Tóibín’s *House of Names* (2017) within a theoretical framework of narrative ethics, this paper argues that a function of cultural healing is actualized both within the retold story of the *Oresteia* and in the context of civil war violence to which the novel responds. Drawing on the work of Hanna Meretoja and Dorothy J. Hale, it suggests that a source of potential ethical power is revealed through the reworking of the ancient tragedy using the structures and techniques of the contemporary novel. Traces of differing worldviews or even ways of constructing cognitive and affective complexity determine a constant oscillation between original and rewritten that creates a space of epistemological uncertainty. Valorised through the meta-ethical affect of unverifiability conceptualised by Hale, this effect is also read in light of Meretoja’s understanding of a narrative-bound sense of possibility and the challenges that both contemporary and ancient understandings of hope or catastrophe pose to its ethically valuable expansion.

**Keywords:** narrative ethics; rewriting; ancient tragedy; hope; unverifiability; civil war; violence; Irish-American fiction; Colm Tóibín.

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The gaps and silences that have become tropes of the fragmented Irish memory are symptomatic of the unspeakability that defines the nation’s historical traumas. Despite such impossibilities, rewriting is seemingly endowed with a potential for cultural healing. It is a bridge between different collective memories and, according to Christian Moraru, it creates in postmodernist and, arguably, also contemporary literature, a “counterwriting distance”<sup>1</sup> from which understanding, (re)interpreting, (re)purposing, and thinking beyond inherited narratives becomes possible.

Colm Tóibín’s *House of Names*<sup>2</sup> may be one of the many such projects in contemporary literature. Through rewriting the ancient tragedies of the *Oresteia*, it offers a direct response to the civil wars in Ireland and Syria and attempts to understand the continuing perpetuation of violence. The Irish Civil War and the later emergence of The Troubles are what prompts Tóibín’s conceptualisation of violence as a “spiral,” a continuous “cycle” of reactions unable to heal and resolve its repressed source.<sup>3</sup> These notions serve to explain the disorienting dispersal and smouldering intensification of the conflict that had reached a

boiling point with the War of Independence and the partition from Northern Ireland, which at times made it impossible to confidently differentiate between one’s allies and enemies—even in spite of conspicuously persistent sectarianism and bigotry. In this sense, Tóibín pinpoints the story of the House of Atreus “the myth of origin of all civil wars,”<sup>4</sup> a potentially structuring and sense-making narrative. Due to its collapsing of the collective into the private, it enables an analysis of the structures that motivate and sustain civil wars—“as, for example, the war in Syria is going on, if you want some version of that as to a sort of myth, a sense of how—what it looks like when this happens intimately, rather than, say, one country at war with another, then I thought, this is the great story.”<sup>5</sup>

As such, *House of Names* may be read as a parallel act of ‘unwriting’ the inherited national(ist) narratives of cyclic violence. In a public talk for the Getty Museum, the author connects his own project of rewriting to those of Irish modernism and the Irish Revival and its two most prominent figures, William Butler Yeats and Lady Augusta Gregory, who recognized the fact that consolidating a national culture could

have a crucial role in the struggles for decolonization. Thus, by not only translating and transcribing Irish myths and folkloric stories, but also through building a national theatre and encouraging the creation of an Irish theatrical tradition, the Revivalists aim to (re)root the burgeoning sense of a national identity in the ancient Irish culture.<sup>6</sup> Thus, the country's heritage is not only legitimized, but, at the same time, used as "political [nationalist] dynamite."<sup>7</sup> In developing their own strategy of nation-building, they follow a Greek paradigm, "using an idea of an ancient entity which people still belonged to despite the passing of centuries or the changing of language or, indeed, of many other things."<sup>8</sup>

However, Tóibín goes on to emphasise that a politicisation of culture may be particularly dangerous and implies great responsibilities, as political gains always hide individual losses. In this way, he points not only to Yeats' drawing on the ancient Greek tradition of theatre or to Lady Gregory's works on Irish mythology, but also to an underlying sense of guilt that pervades other works. For instance, in "Men and the Echo," Yeats asks himself "Did that play of mine send out/ Certain men the English shot?"<sup>9</sup>—unveiling his feeling that, as Tóibín remarks, "one particular play of his that had invoked heroism, that had suggested ancient heroes, had inspired a great number of young men who took part in that rebellion."<sup>10</sup> As such, while fuelling the fight for independence, the Irish Revivalists narratives did, at the same time, nourish a still expanding cycle of nationalist violence.

Consequently, this paper asks if the project of rewriting put forward in *House of Names* can be read as "counterwriting"<sup>11</sup>—in Christian Moraru's sense—the Irish Revival and the tradition of ancient tragedies alike. In other words, it explores whether the structural, technical, and narrative changes necessary for a remoulding of the ancient tragedy into a contemporary novel do contain an inherent ethical potential to narratively end the spiral of violence by recreating hope into a possibility. By drawing on perspectives from the emergent field of narrative ethics—namely, Hanna Meretoja's theory of hermeneutical narrative ethics and Dorothy J. Hale's conceptualisation of "unverifiability,"<sup>12</sup> the paper argues that the novel's ethical strength resides in its ingrafting of hope through an acceptance of epistemological uncertainty and, also, that these effects are achieved despite its incomplete deconstruction of predestination. Fragments of a worldview rooted in fatalism and divine laws and the predetermination inherent in the sense of looming disaster associated with cyclic violence are repurposed by Tóibín in ways that validate the possibility of cultural healing, both *in* the rewritten narrative and *through* the reading experience it entails.

### **Rewriting as 'grafting': Creating spaces of narrative possibility**

In Christian Moraru's efforts to shed light on "rewriting's elusiveness as a literary category,"<sup>13</sup> retelling is identified as "both a symptom and an active instrument"<sup>14</sup> of postmodern narratives. While it signals this "age's penchant for serialization,

sequels, and reruns,"<sup>15</sup> it is also engaged in the critical revisionism of postmodern construction and deconstruction of discourses. As such, the narratives that rewrite are not only "a remolding of a certain literary matrix,"<sup>16</sup> but they do, at the same time, "[put] forth a critical commentary on the sociohistorical ambience—values, ideas, formations, cultural mythologies—within which rewriting is undertaken or within which the reworked text was produced."<sup>17</sup> Moreover, rewriting is also an important means of fostering transnational and transhistorical connections and comparisons. Not only a repetitive rearticulation, but also a transformative act, it is essentially a new lens of filtering and making sense of our culture's formative narratives—" [rewriting] both projects the fictions of the present and undertakes this present's genealogy, critiques it."<sup>18</sup> This section of the paper turns to contemporary writers who—despite making conscious efforts to preserve inherited narratives rather than sharing a deconstructivist impulse—still maintain a desire to critically reinterpret and retell them. However, their approach seems to be idiosyncratically characterized by an increasing preoccupation with the narratives' inherent ethical, world- and self-shaping, potential.<sup>19</sup>

Even when only implicit, contemporaneity's renewed interest in narrative ethics contributes to a process of cultural repositioning in relation to past narratives that does not lose the strength of a revisionary potential. Emerging during the 1980s, "the current explosion of ethical criticism"<sup>20</sup> appeared as a reaction to the preceding formalist and structuralist theories of literature, which refrained from engaging in subjective judgements and evaluations. While it deconstructs the ideal of literature's autonomy, "the ethical (re)turn" was (and continues to be) a reminder that "at almost every other time in the history of Western civilization there has been a powerful consensus that the realms of art and morality are in some way or another intertwined."<sup>21</sup> Ever since, narrative ethics has continued to flourish and generated captivating subframeworks despite the challenges posed by the theories of poststructuralist deconstruction that were developed in parallel. While "the traditional pillars of ethics—the notion of an autonomous subject, meaning, truth"<sup>22</sup> and the understanding of "ethics as a matter of individual responsibility and agency"<sup>23</sup> were denounced, an ethics of fiction was being reconstructed in line with such propositions, rather than against them.

Interestingly enough, it is now acknowledged that such constraints eventually became sources of theoretical strength. For instance, Hale emphasises that, by desubjectivizing agency and responsibility, narrative ethics reconstructs the author into a narrative agent as limited by and bound to the work of fiction as characters and readers. Moreover, following the teachings of poststructuralism, this ethics of literature understands that the ethical strength of narratives does not reside in a moral message that can be conveyed, but is instead inherent in the literary form and always (re)created through the reading act—"what postmodernist theorists couldn't have recognized is how their critique of the liberal subject actually supported the modernist notion of ethical value as inhering



in literary form.”<sup>24</sup> Another example is Hanna Meretoja’s theory of hermeneutical narrative ethics, which argues for a narrative-interpretative continuum that necessarily embeds all narrating agents. To her, interpretation simultaneously enables our understanding of oneself, others, and the world and entails a responsibility for the means and extent to which it influences and (re)shapes the others’ sense-making narratives.

These perspectives can shed new light on the intriguing particularities of Tóibín’s project in *House of Names*, as they raise questions regarding the narrative ethics implied by the reworking of an ancient tragedy into the form of a contemporary novel. For example, the author’s understanding of rewriting as a product of the imagination implies that it is not only a retelling, but a self-aware and effortful “grafting on” of the ancient tragedy on novelistic structures and the specific techniques they require—“I realized it wasn’t that I could do a retelling of the story as much as that I could find the things that were not in the story and I could adapt them or graft them on to the methods of a contemporary novel.”<sup>25</sup> However, the waning faith in divine power that is symptomatic of the rewritten narrative is—as Tóibín suggests—not only a consequence of his understanding of the modern novel as an idiosyncratically “secular space,”<sup>26</sup> but also of Irish culture’s religious disillusionment that followed the traumas brought on by the Catholic Church.<sup>27</sup> In this way, the novel may be read as a critically engaged aesthetic as envisioned by Moraru, but one that also puts into perspective how rewriting can determine extradiegetic acts of reinterpreting and repositioning in relation to inherited literary and cultural narratives. To argue for the fundamentally ethical character of such implications, this paper turns to Meretoja’s conceptualisation of *spaces of possibilities* and to the narrative acts that create, regulate, and restrict them to showcase how Tóibín rethinks both past, future, and past futures as spaces open to reinterpretation and change.

In *The Ethics of Storytelling*, Meretoja puts forward a theory of “hermeneutic narrative ethics”<sup>28</sup> that contests the common notion of a clear-cut distinction between experience and its cognitive integration through interpretation—“experience and narrative are neither the same nor opposed to each other, but rather form an *interpretative continuum*.”<sup>29</sup> Consequently, in a Heideggerian lineage, interpretative acts are understood as constituting our very “mode of being in the world”<sup>30</sup>—“we should see interpretation as an endless activity of (re) orientation, engagement, and sense-making, which is thoroughly worldly, both in the sense of being embedded in a social and historical world and in the sense of participating in performatively constituting that world.”<sup>31</sup> In other words, while there is no possibility of ‘raw’ experiences, narrative-interpretative structures mediate *how* and *what* we experience, make-sense of, or engage with in our relation to the world, ourselves, and others. In addition to this, they also influence others’ similar hermeneutic processes. We are not only caught in a continuous process of interpretation and, thus, “always already entangled in webs of narratives,”<sup>32</sup> but our individual

hermeneutics influences the narratives formulated by others and expands or limits the conditions of their creation.

An understanding of one’s position in the world as such has direct implications on the ethics of narrative and on our self-positioning in the emergent intersubjective space created by the convergence of individual narratives and, subsequently, of different such *narrative in-betweens*. It is in this space that our understanding of what possibilities are available to us is shaped—“the creation of new narrative in-betweens entails novel intersubjective spaces in which unexpected possibilities of being, feeling, thinking, doing, and sharing open up.”<sup>33</sup> In this sense, to Meretoja, the ethical potential of narratives emerges not from an evaluation of narratives in a binary good or bad reference system, but from how “individuals and communities *use, perpetuate, and transform* cultural narrative practices to construct their identities, interpret their experiences, and engage with those of others”<sup>34</sup> and, even more importantly from their “capacity to expand our sense of the possible.”<sup>35</sup>

A similar conceptualisation of an embedding narrative web supports Moraru’s exploration of postmodernist rewriting as well, rendering his claim that retelling constitutes “the ‘motor’ of literary history in the West”<sup>36</sup> particularly interesting. While he explores the revisionary drive of postmodern culture as “the milieu of ‘redoing,’”<sup>37</sup> he argues for an understanding of the process as one of “a complex critical rereading” that “[fulfils] interpretative, aesthetic, as well as ideological and political functions.”<sup>38</sup> Rewritten narratives are not a “support and reduplication of the already-written”<sup>39</sup>—as, for instance, translations. Rather, they “set up a *counterwriting* distance, a ‘rupture’ between themselves and what they redo—the literary past—as well as between themselves and various hegemonic forces active at the moment.”<sup>40</sup> In this way, their return to past narratives with a critical gaze is telling of the sense of possibility that may be generated and exploited through the same process of their rewriting. Moreover, their critical reinterpretation is, at the same time, a self-aware recognition and repositioning in the narrative in-between—the “bodies of writing” that “much of contemporary writing works on—and again, obsessively works through” are “bodies [that] have already bodied forth, narrativized and decisively structured core ideas, identities, and existential rites.”<sup>41</sup> Just as in Meretoja’s understanding, this is one of the primary justifications for the responsibility one has, on the one hand, *to* rewrite, but, at the same time, *while* rewriting—“these are our mythic stories since they ‘explain’ us—they represent our *legends*, literally, the founding texts that, etymologically we are *to read*. They literally *tell* us. They tell (us) who we are and how we have come to be what we are.”<sup>42</sup>

To Meretoja, the sense of the possible is shaped through the interplay between the *narrative unconscious* and the *narrative imagination*.<sup>43</sup> On the one hand, the recognition of the extent to which storytelling is an inherently intersubjective act constitutes the basis of an ethical production and reception of narratives. It is essential to understand that their world-shaping potential is not historically restricted. It claims our responsibility towards others across time, as well as our

attention to how we are unconsciously influenced by the narratives we inherit, with enormous ethical consequences, “the stories we tell are never entirely our own.”<sup>44</sup>

Echoing Moraru, Meretoja emphasises the interplay between *the narrative imagination*—an understanding that “we are largely unaware of the cultural narrative webs and narrative traditions that regulate how we narrate the past, understand our possibilities in the present, and orient ourselves to the future”<sup>45</sup>—and *the narrative unconscious* and their role in shaping the sense of the possible. In the embedding narrative web, it is one of our responsibilities to avoid the “blind perpetuation”<sup>46</sup> of the consciously and unconsciously inherited narratives—we need “not only integrate [the narrative unconscious] into our self-understanding, but also engage with it critically.”<sup>47</sup> However, Meretoja’s understanding of a critical engagement stands apart from the tenets of deconstructivism. Instead, it is guided by an explorative imagination “characterized by an openness to the unknown and a willingness to imagine other possible ways of living, feeling, and thinking.”<sup>48</sup>

It is also important to note that she expands her theory into a renewed understanding of history. While it is largely ignored and usually not given “ethical relevance”<sup>49</sup> within the field of narrative ethics, *the sense of history* is similarly influenced by the interdependence between the narrative unconscious and imagination. As such, new spaces of possibility may be identified and opened up in the past, through a reinterpretation of how narrative in-betweens were configured at that time and what possibilities and responsibilities they entailed. At the same time, it is a process of understanding how their narrative traces continue to influence and limit narrative webs in the present—“narratives can help us imagine the openness of each historical present as a time of action: how the people of the past lived in an indeterminate present and made choices and decisions that shaped history.”<sup>50</sup> In this sense, Tóibín’s focus on the spaces of possibilities created *by* and *within* the world of the ancient tragedies may hold interesting insights into the ethics of fiction. While the fatalistic worldview of antiquity excluded the self-shaping power of free will, it is important to revisit this exclusion and reanalyse how—as in the case of all historical presents—“their present was not a predetermined part of a linear chain of events, but an open space in which the future was in the process of being made.”<sup>51</sup> Thus, Tóibín’s approach to rewriting the ancient tragedy aims at giving characters the agency of a world not bound by the constraints of fatalism and divine power.

However, ‘unwriting’ a worldview rooted in predetermination and sacred laws necessarily restructures one’s means of understanding and relating to the future. Starting from this hypothesis, the following section investigates the ways in which hope is transplanted and reconceptualised in the novel. Subsequently, it inquires into the effects that rethinking futurity from within antiquity’s worldview has on contemporary culture and on the spaces of possibilities that the rewriting creates or invalidates for characters and readers alike.

### Sustaining hope in unverifiable futurities

Despite our tendency to overgeneralize hope as a positive affect, throughout history there has been no consensus regarding it being a virtue or “a pleasurable or comforting” emotion.<sup>52</sup> Even in philosophy, there is no unifying definition. However, there seems to be an agreement that it is distinctively future-oriented—“hope, unlike optimism, does not require us to believe that things will turn out as we want; in hoping we need only cling to the thought that they *might*.”<sup>53</sup> Thus, by shifting from an unyielding confidence in one’s will towards an acceptance of different outcomes, hope creates the sense of an open and hospitable futurity where “all is not decided *for us*”<sup>54</sup> and the space of the possible can still be narratively shaped and expanded.

Nevertheless, the perception of the future in modern culture—and, implicitly, of hope—has been considerably altered during the recent past. The sense of better alternative futures is a debt to modernity’s, now invalidated, belief in autonomy and progress. Instead, as Eva Horn explores in *The Future as Catastrophe*, contemporary narratives of the future are rather shaped around a persistent “sense of looming danger.”<sup>55</sup> Tracing *catastrophe*’s variations in meaning throughout history, Horn looks into how they developed from an unexpected turning point that did not always bear negative connotations<sup>56</sup> into a diffused “*catastrophe without event*.”<sup>57</sup> Foreseeable, yet imminent, the present understanding of disaster is now explained as the protraction of *the tipping point*—as a “moment when simply going on with our customary lifestyles will gradually lead to catastrophe—yet one that we can hardly anticipate in its scenario and repercussions.”<sup>58</sup>

However, continuing antiquity’s legacy of prediction and attempted prevention, modernity permanently improves its scientific systems of foreknowledge. While bleak prognoses continue to undermine hope, the narrative structure of the ancient tragedy—“a catastrophic future that needs to be thwarted”<sup>59</sup>—is still preserved and transformed. In this way, the future does not completely close itself off from our imagination, but remains a space of narrative possibility. In her analysis of contemporary cultural responses to an impending catastrophe, Horn shows how imagining alternative futures has become a space for self-understanding and reflection on the present through an idiosyncratic narrativization that either tries to predict or, through a hindsight perspective, to test different predictions—“knowing and communicating about the future is impossible without stories: stories that ‘look back’ from the future to the present or that extrapolate from past predictions about what is to come.”<sup>60</sup>

Furthermore, a grappling with the uncertainty and unexpectedness of the future is another of antiquity’s legacy. Because they conceived the future as “a thread of life that unravels inexorably,” it could be known and predicted, “apprehended or misapprehended.”<sup>61</sup> However, it is this very possibility that begets the individuals’ tragic fate in the first place. Unable to act against it, they become “characters in a drama written by the oracle”<sup>62</sup>—the information they receive



cannot be used in their favour. Consequently, instead of creating a space of possibility, the acknowledged future remains unalterable and viscerally hidden—"man bears his future within himself (...) like an organ inaccessible to him, part of his existence, but one that can neither be changed nor removed."<sup>63</sup>

In this way, to Horn, the ancient tragedy comes to represent the exemplary genre of "an aesthetic form that intricately entwines knowing and not knowing the future."<sup>64</sup> While contemporaneity's efforts to predict future dangers meet with comparable unsurpassable epistemological mistrust, the "fascination with catastrophe"<sup>65</sup> Horn identifies may be seen as a return to similar narrative designs, because, in both cases, prediction and its potentiality make space for narrative creation. If, in ancient tragedies, the revolt against one's fate is the very means through which subjectivity and agency are exposed, contemporaneity narrates the future to prevent, prepare, and cope with potential disaster. Thus, they both find means to foster hope and create—or protect—the sense of an open future that can be known, narrated, and renarrated.

The crossroad of epistemological uncertainty at which contemporary and ancient narrative structures meet may be further developed upon by drawing on Dorothy J. Hale's concept of "unverifiability."<sup>66</sup> Writing from a narrative ethics framework, Hale reduces the differences between liberal-humanist and poststructuralist branches of the field to emphasise an essentially complementary understanding of "the right way of reading"<sup>67</sup>—and writing—as an "ability to be open to the otherness that [readers—and writers] cannot be sure of but feel they experience."<sup>68</sup> In this sense, Hale's argument proposes that the novel's ethical effect lies in its play with simultaneous feelings of freedom and social constraint—"readers experience the free play of imagination as produced through a power struggle with a social other. The struggle to bind turns back upon the reader, enabling him to experience himself as unfree, as in a constitutive relation with the other, who in turn binds him."<sup>69</sup> She follows the assertion by conceptualising this experience as the basis of an allegedly "meta-ethical emotion,"<sup>70</sup> *unverifiability*. A reconsideration of affect *from* and *within* poststructuralist narrative ethics—a framework that had programmatically dismissed them—unverifiability is, essentially, a more ethical way of relating to knowledge gaps, in both literature and the social embedding world. Thus, it is once again highlighted that the ethical value of literature does not reside in its delivering a set of moral values, "a list of rules or tips to guide conduct,"<sup>71</sup> but, as Hale insightfully claims, its lessons are in the very "overthrow of epistemology by experience, the troubling of certainty by an apprehension that comes through surprised feeling."<sup>72</sup> To her and to narrative ethicists, the reading experience enables a paradoxical knowledge that challenges and questions one's previous knowledge and epistemological boundaries—"ethical encounter is made possible by every felt failure to know and made new through every repetition."<sup>73</sup>

Revalorised as such, epistemological uncertainty is endowed with "a positive (and absolute) ethical content,"

without dismissing the lessons of postmodernism and poststructuralism and their "skeptical regard for reason as a tool of hegemony."<sup>74</sup> From this perspective, it can be argued that the balance Tóibín finds between the widely known narrative frame and the newness of a rewriting bears a particular ethical charge. In addition, as it will be explored in the following section, the co-dependence between knowing and not knowing that has been implicit in humanity's understanding of futurity ever since antiquity creates the favourable conditions for a sense of possibility and hope—including the possibility of narratives of violence and revenge being definitively diffused.

### Hope *in* Betweenness

Immediately after being murdered by her son, Clytemnestra is once again given voice to. However, her monologue as a spectre comes not from a source of retaliation, but rather, and interestingly, from a place of remnant feelings, memories, and language. The negative affects that filtered her actions and sense of futurity after Iphigenia's sacrifice are now replaced with love—"now I have lost what leads up to rage and sorrow. Maybe the only reason I wander in these spaces has to do with some other feeling, or what is left of it. Maybe that feeling is love."<sup>75</sup>

What is interesting is that this in-between state can be read as a spatial representation of unverifiability. It is a place where "being perplexed and bewildered replaces truth and knowledge, replaces what is real and tangible"<sup>76</sup> and even reaches a point of ontological instability and uncertainty—"some lines or shapes (...) must have made sense at one time, or may still make sense, but seem random now."<sup>77</sup> Also, Clytemnestra's coming to her post-death consciousness is directly linked to her inability to remember—not only her death, but also, and more importantly, words and names. As she is gradually repossessing this knowledge, one of the ethical nuclei of the novel is revealed: in the process of entrusting the character with the duty to remember and relearn, the author also redistributes his ethical duty.

To achieve such effects, Clytemnestra must reclaim power over both language and memory. She must (re)learn, retrieve, and repossess in order to reach the only possible, incomplete, "shadowy stability."<sup>78</sup> One of the causes of this imperative is Clytemnestra's confidence in speech being the sole means of achieving closure—"maybe there are things that did not come to an end when I was there, and *they linger now like words* that need to be said, or words that have escaped me and will come or might come or must come as I wait here."<sup>79</sup> In this sense, it is not the initial voicing of Clytemnestra as an agent of retaliation and revenge that contributes to the ethical dimension of Tóibín's rewriting, but rather this necessary self-made recreation of that act. While speech had been recurrently refused to her both narratively and culturally—on the one hand, due to her husband's asserting agency over their daughter's fate and, on the other hand, as Tóibín remarks, due to a gap in literary history for a speech equally powerful as

those of Medea, Antigone, or Electra,<sup>80</sup>—the several ways in which this chapter forces her to reclaim language and reinvest it with feelings of love and forgiveness arguably constitute the ethical nucleus of the retold narrative and, subsequently, the symbolic means of ending the perpetuation of the spiral of violence.

Nevertheless, in the absence of language and rationality, a transgenerational, transpersonal, and involuntary memory constitutes the only means through which Clytemnestra “connects and attaches and withdraws.”<sup>81</sup> As with words—ungraspable, yet felt as inherently powerful—these memories are “almost something,” “a vague thought [that] hovers but is never stable.”<sup>82</sup> It is important to note that in this way they still maintain the valences of unverifiability and, due to this very reason, the valences of potential violence. Clytemnestra’s incomplete recollection of the memory of Zeus’ rape of Leda, through which she was conceived, is thus important—

“There is one remnant that comes and persists, however. It is my mother at some moment in the distant past; she is helpless, being held down. I can hear cries, her cries, and the shriller cries of a figure above her, or lying on her, and then louder cries as the figure flits away, a figure with a beak and wings, with the shape of wings, the wings beating in the air, and my mother lying breathless, whimpering. But I do not know what this means or why it comes to me.”<sup>83</sup>

Even though she cannot make sense of it on her own, the reference has an important bearing on the readers’ imagination. It is a suggestion of how the cycle of violence has traversed multiple generations. It is also a suggestion that, in the narrative ethicist reading inspired by Hale and Meretoja, eliminating the possibility of potential disaster would be the true unethical alternative. In this sense, it can be argued that this very oscillation between opposites that is possible in the space of unverifiability enables the ingrafting of hope even despite remnants of fatalism or incessant conflict.

In this sense, this section proposes that the novel employs an idiosyncratic reconstruction of an unstable affect, permanently vacillating between traces of the original and new superimpositions. Not only are there remainders of a worldview based on predetermination and divine guidance—as materialized, for example, in the two ‘prophetess’ figures, Cassandra and the old woman, an Irish mythological *Cailleach*, or in the suggestions of a just discovered secular power of language—but there are also explicit constructions of heterogeneous affective structures, such as pairs of hope and fear and hope and anger, on which the rest of this section focuses.

In *Hope: A Literary History*, Adam Potkay sheds new light on the complexity of both understanding and practising hope throughout history. He denounces contemporary tendencies not only to overgeneralize it as a positive affect, but also to overlook its complex historical perceptions as a negatively connoted emotion, with sensible limits and dangers. Subsequently, he looks into antiquity’s “case against hope.”<sup>84</sup>

Exploring the possible reasoning behind this belief, Potkay mentions the perception of hope as deceptive—“blurring our perception of situation and likely outcomes”<sup>85</sup> and relying on “an uncertain future that rarely arrives as we imagine it”<sup>86</sup>—also, “morally corrosive,”<sup>87</sup> a passion rather than a rational mode of thinking, idiosyncratically passive, and, certainly future-oriented, but in ways that distract one’s focus from the present.<sup>88</sup> In addition to these, one of the most intriguing reasons why hope had negative connotations in antiquity was its understanding as a complement to fear and anger.

Drawing on Aristotle’s *The Art of Rhetoric*, Potkay notes how, even when the explicit emotional charge is of anger, fear, or retaliation, hope “feature[s] as a constituent part of other passions.”<sup>89</sup> In this way, each act of revenge implies a compensatory sense of a possible future where one’s plan succeeds. Thus, quoting Aristotle, Potkay emphasises that “the pain involved in anger is counter-balanced by the ‘pleasure based on the expectation [or hope, from Greek *elpis*] of achieving retaliation’ (1378a, 61).”<sup>90</sup> In this sense, the novel’s option for in-between feelings can be traced back to the beginning and the first representation of a “spiral of violence.”<sup>91</sup> Even though Clytemnestra remembers how the promise of a wedding between Iphigenia and Achilles could have projected “the future as a place of plenty,”<sup>92</sup> the sudden refocusing on the present is symbolic for the foreshadowed murders and their irrational, yet almost physiological drive—“we are all hungry now. Food merely whets our appetite, it sharpens our teeth; meat makes us ravenous for more meat, as death is ravenous for more death. Murder makes us ravenous, fills the soul with satisfaction that is fierce and then luscious enough to create a taste for further satisfaction.”<sup>93</sup> Despite its recognition, acceptance, and apparent epistemological transparency, it is, arguably, also a representation of unverifiability through the feeling of instability it confers—“I no longer want sharpness. I do not need clarity. I need a time like now, when each object ceases to be itself and melts towards what is close to it, just as each action I and others have performed ceases to stand alone waiting for someone to come and judge it or record it. Nothing is stable.”<sup>94</sup>

Similarly, the hope and fear binary is suggested by the Stoic philosophy, as the possibility of a desired outcome always necessarily preserves its potential failure.<sup>95</sup> Consequently, in Potkay’s words, “susceptibility to hope—which may seem a better emotion than others—makes us susceptible to the negative future-oriented emotion of fear, as well as the negative present-oriented emotion of sorrow or disappointment.”<sup>96</sup> What makes this pair extremely captivating and, arguably, more pervasively present in Tóibín’s rewriting is its presence in Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon*. In its beginning, a watchman waits hopefully for the light announcing the victory of Agamemnon’s army—

“It’s one long year I’m laying here watching waiting watching waiting—  
(...) and I watch I watch I watch for this sign of a torch,  
a beacon light sending from Troy the news that she is captured.”<sup>97</sup>



In a way, the intermingling between hope and hard work—which is one of the “values” that allegedly “rise[s] when hope declines”<sup>98</sup>—is particularly interesting. However, the symbol of the light and the gleams of hope are explicitly interconnected as a response to the fear of an impending disaster and the imposed silence it determines—

“I cannot close my eyes—fear stand over me instead of sleep.  
(...) This house is in trouble.  
The good days are gone.  
How I pray for change! A happy change. A light in darkness.”<sup>99</sup>

As far as Tóibín’s rewriting is concerned, Clytemnestra is the one looking out for the light and smoke signals of victory. She is anxious, angry, and awaits her revenge. Her independence and self-reliance are, at the same time, connected to the symptomatic secularization of the narrative—“it was the fire that brought the news, not the gods. Among the gods now there is no one who offers me assistance or oversees my actions or knows my mind.”<sup>100</sup>

While the repurposing of the light symbol contributes to the novel’s deconstruction of transcendental meaning, the sea can be similarly read as a more subtle token of the watchman’s hope. Its preservation and adaptation in *House of Names* are also noteworthy. Thus, as far as Orestes’ narrative is concerned, Tóibín engages in a very localising rewriting in order to fill in the narrative gaps. The years during which the boy is missing from the palace after he has been kidnapped along with other boys at Aegisthus’ orders are imaginatively transposed in a recognizably Irish landscape, in the house of an old woman who is intentionally reconstructed in the image of an Irish mythological *Cailleach*. After Orestes escapes along Leander and Mitros, finding a safe place to hide is almost hopeless. However, when they arrive at a house on the coastal cliffs, their probably last chance is related, through the perspective of Orestes, with his surprised recognition of the sea—

“He listened and indicated to Mitros that he should listen too as this sound, like someone larger than they were who was sleeping peacefully, breathing with ease, came and went. It made him certain for a short time that there was someone nearby, someone who would wake soon and who would have to be dealt with. And then Mitros whispered to him: ‘It’s the sea.’ Suddenly, that made sense.”<sup>101</sup>

Despite the defensive impulse, its association with safety and protection is immediately reinforced through Orestes’ feelings and Leander’s confirmation that the old woman has accepted to shelter them—

“As they waited, it was almost as if they were being rocked in a boat, so regular was the rhythm of the water. Orestes felt that if he concentrated on the sound of the sea and forgot everything else, then at least he would not have to think (...) The fact that [Leander] was almost shouting suggested to Orestes that he was confident that it was safe. They stood up

when they heard his voice. ‘She says we can stay,’ he said.”<sup>102</sup>

In addition to this, the sea will also become Orestes’ preferred hiding and day-dreaming place. Thus created, the correlation between, on the one hand, the sea and the motion of the waves and, on the other hand, hope and psychological comfort is representative of how the boy manages to expand his sense of the possible on his own, by creating narratives of being rescued and going home—“sometimes, Orestes gazed at the sea, searching the horizon for boats or ships.”<sup>103</sup> Nevertheless, his narrative imagination does not create feasible plans and Orestes continues to prefer letting others decide in his place. In this way, the hope and agency that are conferred to him are restricted to a twilight zone of in-betweenness, with fear and—as in the case of Clytemnestra, anger—still conspicuously present in the novel’s affective structures.

As far as the reconstruction of hope is concerned, the ending is an equally telling example. Following Orestes’ encounter with the spectre of his mother, the last paragraphs of the novel mark the birth of Ianthe’s child at dawn as well as—echoing the beginning of Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon*—his and Leander’s expectative stance, as the father and uncle to be. A radical openness towards the world and alterity is representative of a changed position in the embedding narrative web—“all they could do now was wait as they heard the noise of people getting ready for the day. (...) Almost afraid to look at each other, the two went back into the corridor and stood together without saying a word, listening to every sound.”<sup>104</sup> The suggestion of a new beginning is symbolic of the possibility that Clytemnestra may find the closure that has kept her in the in-between space of afterlife—“in time, what had happened would haunt no one and belong to no one, once they themselves had passed on into the darkness and into the abiding shadows.”<sup>105</sup> As such, it is also a way of ending the perpetuation of the cycle of violence, and thus removing their story from the narrative unconscious in a culturally healing gesture.

## Conclusions

The critical rewriting in which Tóibín engages does not deconstruct the inherited narrative, but, by positioning the rewriter within the text, rather creates new spaces of possibility and reinterpretation in which to write in ethically powerful affects such as unverifiability and hope. Thus, the retelling manages to separate the narrative web weaved around it from the cycles of violence with which it is associated. To support this argument, the paper drew on Hanna Meretoja’s theory of hermeneutic narrative ethics and on Dorothy J. Hale’s understanding of unverifiability as a meta-ethical emotion in order to explore how Christian Moraru’s view of rewriting as critically engaged counterwriting is being adapted in contemporary literature. According to Meretoja, if all experience is dependent on narrative sense-making structures, the ethical function of storytelling consists in its ability to enlarge the sense of narrative possibility. Because hope is a feeling inherently linked with one’s perception

of future prospects, the study also explores how it can be reconstructed despite predetermination, as created either by the weight of an inherited literary canon, the remnants of a fatalist worldview, or the sense of a looming disaster that dominates contemporary culture. Working with the research of Eva Horn and Adam Potkay in apprehending hope and catastrophe across history, it was suggested that accepting an already decided conclusion while, at the same time, recognizing the opportunities created by contingency, unpredictability, and epistemological uncertainty can make new space for hopeful expectation.

To emphasise literature's important role in this sense, this paper turned to a narrative ethicist reading of Colm Tóibín's novel *House of Names*. It analysed the particularities

of its argued ingrafting of hope as a result of the opening up of the narrative structures generally associated with the ancient tragedy: fatalistic predetermination, lack of agency, and—as Potkay's study shows—the critical perception of hope. Consequently, the paper has proposed that the necessary remainders of the reworked narrative determine an idiosyncratic assemblage of affects—one that continuously oscillates between the 'old' and the 'new' ways of writing, with interdependent pairs such as fear/hope or anger/hope, in ways that have the potential to make sense of and even remove from our narrative unconscious the enduring, self-perpetuating narratives of violence, Tóibín's understanding of civil wars as spirals of conflicts being a case in point.

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### Notes:

1. Christian Moraru, *Rewriting: Postmodern Narrative and Cultural Critique in the Age of Cloning* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), 9.
2. Colm Tóibín, *House of Names* (Sydney: Picador, 2017), Kindle.
3. Colm Tóibín, "Colm Tóibín sees the 'origin of all civil wars' in this Greek tragedy," interview by Jeffrey Brown, *PBS News Hours*, July 3, 2017, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/colm-toibin-sees-origin-civil-wars-greek-tragedy>. "That with any civil war—for example, the troubles in Northern Ireland or what's happening in Syria—it begins with one killing. And then it's impossible to put the genie back in the bottle. It's retaliation after retaliation. So, the violence within a civil war or violence with a gang feud is always a spiral. It's one and then it's five. And then it's something atrocious occurs further. So to that extent, we're still living in that idea of violence not as a single act, but as a cycle," *Ibid.*
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*
6. Colm Tóibín, "House of Names," May 20, 2017, The Getty Villa, Malibu, California, YouTube video, 1:09:42, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wA3Y5ORnov4>, 00:09:38-00:13:35.
7. *Ibid.*, 00:09:40-45.
8. *Ibid.*, 00:11:53-00:12:10.
9. William Butler Yeats, "Men and the Echo" in *The Collected Works of W.B. Yeats. Volume I: The Poems*, ed. Richard J. Finneran, 2nd edition (New York: Scribner, 1997), 353-4.
10. Tóibín, "House of Names," The Getty Villa, 26:35-55.
11. Moraru, *Rewriting*, 9.
12. Dorothy J. Hale, *The Novel and the New Ethics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2020), 191.
13. Moraru, *Rewriting*, xii.
14. *Ibid.*, 9.
15. *Ibid.*
16. *Ibid.*, xiii.
17. *Ibid.*, xii.
18. *Ibid.*, 9.
19. In Dorothy J. Hale's view in *The Novel and the New Ethics*, the first "ethical moment" of modernist literature is followed by a second such moment in contemporary literature, which makes explicit "the implied ethical value that modernists attributed to novelistic narrative" and further expands on it, ix-x.
20. Liesbeth Korthals Altes, "Ethical Turn," in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*, eds. David Herman, Manfred Jahn, and Marie-Laure Ryan (London: Routledge, 2005), 143.
21. Jakob Lothe and Hawthorn Jeremy, "Introduction: The Ethical (Re)Turn," in *Narrative Ethics*, eds. Jakob Lothe, and Hawthorn Jeremy (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2013), 1.
22. Altes, "Ethical Turn," 144.
23. Dorothy J. Hale, *The Novel*, 2.
24. *Ibid.*, 3.
25. Colm Tóibín, "House of Names," May 17, 2017, The Free Library of Philadelphia, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, YouTube video, 57:29, <https://youtu.be/3UpIFMG19ec>, 00:35:44-36:00.



26. Tóibín, "House of Names," *The Getty Villa*, 00:53:40-53.
27. *Ibid.*, 00:57:20-55.
28. Hanna Meretoja, *The Ethics of Storytelling: Narrative Hermeneutics, History, and the Possible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 13.
29. *Ibid.*, 44, emphasis added.
30. *Ibid.*, 6.
31. *Ibid.*, 10.
32. *Ibid.*, 2.
33. *Ibid.*, 143.
34. *Ibid.*, 144.
35. *Ibid.*, 90.
36. Moraru, *Rewriting*, 7.
37. *Ibid.*, 9.
38. *Ibid.*
39. *Ibid.*
40. *Ibid.*
41. *Ibid.*, 8.
42. *Ibid.*
43. Meretoja, *Ethics of Storytelling*, 18.
44. *Ibid.*
45. *Ibid.*
46. *Ibid.*, 91.
47. *Ibid.*, 18.
48. *Ibid.*, 91.
49. *Ibid.*, 94.
50. *Ibid.*, 94-5.
51. *Ibid.*, 95.
52. Adam Polkay, *Hope: A Literary History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 1.
53. Michael Milona, "Hope," in *International Encyclopedia of Ethics*, 2nd edition, ed. Hugh LaFollette (Wiley-Blackwell, 2019), 1.
54. Margaret Urban Walker, *Moral Repair: Reconstructing Moral Relations after Wrongdoing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 45, quoted in Milona, "Hope," 1.
55. Eva Horn, *The Future as Catastrophe: Imagining Disaster in the Modern World*, trans. Valentine Pakis (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 7.
56. *Ibid.*, 6.
57. *Ibid.*, 8.
58. *Ibid.*
59. *Ibid.*, 180.
60. *Ibid.*, 10.
61. *Ibid.*, 190.
62. *Ibid.*, 189.
63. *Ibid.*
64. *Ibid.*, 181.
65. *Ibid.*, 234.
66. Hale, *The Novel*, 191.
67. *Ibid.*
68. *Ibid.*, 191-2.
69. *Ibid.*, 190.
70. *Ibid.*, 191.
71. *Ibid.*, 190.
72. *Ibid.*
73. *Ibid.*
74. *Ibid.*, 191.
75. Tóibín, *House*, "Clytemnestra" (Chapter 5).
76. *Ibid.*
77. *Ibid.*
78. *Ibid.*
79. *Ibid.*; emphasis added.

80. Tóibín, "House of Names," *The Free Library of Philadelphia*, 30:38–32:10.
81. Tóibín, *House*, "Clytemnestra" (Chapter 5).
82. *Ibid.*
83. *Ibid.*
84. Potkay, *Hope*, 5.
85. *Ibid.*, 29.
86. *Ibid.*, 10.
87. *Ibid.*
88. *Ibid.*, 10–1. Potkay draws attention to the second half of the "carpe diem" phrase—"trusting the future as little as possible," 9.
89. *Ibid.*, 60.
90. *Ibid.*, commentary in the original.
91. Tóibín, "Colm Tóibín."
92. Tóibín, *House*, "Clytemnestra" (Chapter 1).
93. *Ibid.*
94. *Ibid.*
95. Potkay, *Hope*, 31.
96. *Ibid.*, 10–11.
97. Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, *An Oresteia: Agamemnon by Aiskhylos, Elektra by Sophokles, Orestes by Euripides*, Trans. Anne Carson (New York: Faber and Faber, 2009), 11.
98. Potkay, *Hope*, 29.
99. Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, *An Oresteia*, 11–12.
100. Tóibín, *House*, "Clytemnestra" (Chapter 1).
101. Tóibín, *House*, "Orestes" (Chapter 2).
102. *Ibid.*
103. *Ibid.*
104. *Ibid.*, "Orestes" (Chapter 6).
105. *Ibid.*

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