ANDRÉ ACIMAN AND COLM TÓIBÍN:

LANDSCAPES OF EROS AND LOSS

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**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Good evening on this very cold night, my name is Paul Holdengräber, and I'm the director of Public Programs here, it's called LIVE from the New York Public Library, as all of you know, I've said this a hundred times, my goal is to make the lions roar, to levitate, and to provide you with cognitive theater. For *Call Me By Your Name,* André Aciman's debut novel, and for Colm Tóibín's collection of stories, *Mothers and Sons,* both have received the warmest of praise. "The stories *in Mothers and Sons* are wistful and complex, to form the panoramic portrait of loss."

"If you are prepared," writes Nicole Krauss, "to take a hard punch in your gut, and like brave, acute, elated, naked, brutal, tender, humane, and beautiful prose, then you've come to the right place. If you can't handle the violence of regret, *Call me By Your Name* will awaken in you, or the agony of remembering, wanting someone more than you wanted anything in your life, or the exquisite suffering that comes with the gain and loss of something that neared perfect understanding, then don't read this book. Ditto, if you like your literature censored, otherwise open the cover and let Aciman pull the pin from the grenade." Wow.

Between regret and loss, tonight Colm Tóibín and André Aciman and have chosen the title "Landscape of Eros and Loss." They plan to discuss uplifting themes like—such as

longing, heartbreak, and language, the poetics of love and death. Which comes first, desire or heartbreak, love or loss, and which lasts longer, remembrance or remorse.

A quick announcement: I would like to invite all of you to join our email list so you might hear about our upcoming events. William T. Vollmann and Karl Taro Greenfeld will be talking tomorrow about why we are poor. Mira Nair and Jhumpa Lahiri will be talking about *The Namesake*, or as someone in my little boy's school called it, "The Na-may-sak-ee." **(laughter)** Clive James will be in conversation with me on the 26th of March for a fantastic new book he has, called *Cultural Amnesia*. April 10 we will have a conversation with Leslie Bennetts on "The Feminine Mistake." Then Jan Morris, probably the greatest living travel writer, will come on April 13. On May 22 we will have a conversation with Rebecca Mead about the wedding industry, a hundred-and-sixty-billion dollar industry, and Gunter Grass will end our season on June 27. For all of you who join the email list today, you will get a free ticket. I would also encourage all of you to think of funding our programs, we of course need as much help as we possibly can get.

André Aciman is the author of books that have mattered to me throughout my more mature years, which started recently: *Out of Egypt* and *False Papers*, also *The Proust Project*, and *Letters of Transit*, two splendid collections he edited. Colm Tóibín is the author of many extraordinary books, among them, *The Master*, *The Blackwater Light Ship*, *The Story of the Night*.

Both André Aciman and Colm Tóibín were fellows the same year, they caused havoc at the Dorothy and Lewis B. Cullman Center for Fellows and Writers here at the New York Public Library. Of loss, I think of possession and of Rainer's words: "Now loss," he writes, "however cruel, is powerless against possession, which it completes or even affirms. Loss is in fact nothing else than a second acquisition, but now completely interiorized and just as intense." It gives me great pleasure to discuss eros and loss, to welcome Colm Tóibín and André Aciman.

**(applause)**

**COLM TÓIBÍN:** André, I want to start and even for people here who have read *Out of Egypt*, if you could just give us some account of your early childhood, your adolescence, and what actually happened to you up to the age of 14.

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** I was born in Alexandria, Egypt, under, I think, during the very last days of the British system, and eventually I grew up at a time when the British were being kicked out, when the French were being kicked out, when the Germans and the Italians were gradually leaving, and all who remained were Greeks, Armenians, ex-Turks, I was an ex-Turk, and some Jews remained. So that after 1956, when there was a war against Egypt, my life had totally changed, in other words, the whole matrix of my childhood and my family's life and their lifestyle, was quickly disappearing. Which means that by 1965, my parents had lost everything, we were no longer tolerated in Egypt, and we were eventually kicked out. So in a way, I lost Egypt, and it was, in order to recount and go back to that country that I had lost that I wrote Out of Egypt.

**COLM TÓIBÍN:** And you describe the extraordinary richness of family life, for example. And the sort of unlikelihood of you all being there in the first place. And the beautiful summers you had and the meals you had, that there's a sense of a huge richness, in that childhood, which perhaps only children feel more than other people. But certainly there was a sense of you in an oasis of unlikely happiness there.

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** It seems that way on paper, doesn't it? **(laughter)** Because I think that's what writing does. It resurrects certain things that you would like to believe were nice, and by virtue of resurrecting them, makes them wonderful. And the parts that you think were ugly, you have to mention them, but ultimately, they get sort of shunted to the side. So that you do have this very vibrant picture of a fantastic life of a wonderful place that I am told I loved.

**COLM TÓIBÍN:** And then you have a picture also of the scattering of people afterwards, ending up in Venice in tiny apartments, in Paris, in tiny apartments, in

England, in vast estates, and all of that sort of wonder being spread all over. And you, for the book, going to look at bits of it to see what the splinters, or what the fragments, looked like, when the glass was broken.

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** What they have become. And I mean, I think this is one of the secrets about loss, when you lose things, you don't only lose a particular world, a particular city, a way of life, but you ultimately also lose money, and nobody talks about the loss of money, because it's not a very elegant thing to discuss. So, you talk about loss of place, which is far more noble. And you can imagine what happened to any person after he was kicked out blind. He had lost all his money too, that also is a part of that life. But it is also the sense of loss, so you have these people who are totally penniless, doing jobs that they were never trained to do, living in places that they're not used to living in, and barely making ends meet in ways that they are totally unprepared to do.

**COLM TÓIBÍN:** What languages were you brought up in?

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** I was brought up in French, that was the official language--

**COLM TÓIBÍN:** You talked French to your father.

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** Yes, you heard me speak to my father.

**COLM TÓIBÍN:** I did, I was amazed one day to hear you talk in French to your father. And then, you spoke Arabic?

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** Yes, I spoke Arabic, and studied Arabic in school, I spoke French, and Italian, and then I went to British schools, and they were really old, colonial schools, that were created around the turn of the century for the, I don't know, the children of colonial administrators, who were widespread in the Middle East, who would come to Egypt, and go to those wonderful Eaton-like and Harrow-like, horrible schools.

**COLM TÓIBÍN:** And when you began to read seriously, what language did you read in, seriously?

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** English.

**COLM TÓIBÍN:** English.

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** So English became my reading and literary language.

**COLM TÓIBÍN:** And when you were scattered, where did you go first?

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** I went to Italy first, and then I went to France, and then I came here to the United States.

**COLM TÓIBÍN:** How did you come here? I mean, why did you come here?

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** Oh, I came here because I had an aunt, and I had just finished high school in Italy, and this was 1968, for those of you who remember 1968, 1968 was not a good year for some of us. I wanted to go to university in Paris, and this was 1968, and I realized this was not going to work, and so I decided to go to university in Italy, and they had the same thing that happened in May 1968, it happened in June, July in Italy. So that was out. And they had no tolerance for a child been to British and American schools, so I decided to come to the States and fortunately I had an aunt who lived here, and she helped me emigrate here.

**COLM TÓIBÍN:** I did an event recently in Dublin where I spoke to a group of psychoanalysts, and the agreement was that I would read them a story, if afterwards I could ask them questions, just, and I asked them, with all of what patients or clients or whatever the words is, was it the case that when damage was done, even when it wasn't called damage, but let's say when a DNA of the self was made, that they were having to deal with as psychoanalysts, was there any case where that DNA was made as an adult?

And they were dealing with adult experience? And they said no, never. Almost--they said just never, that you form, that your DNA, that your spirit, that your sort of arc of who you are, is formed in childhood. And if that's the case with you, is that loss of Alexandria, of the rich family life, of those streets, those houses, is that the thing that has most formed you and made you?

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** It's a good question. I don't know the answer, because I think that the good answer would be, yes. That's what I am because of that loss. In other words, I take that loss, and I do something with it in order to put it away or in order to resolve it. But I'm not so sure. I think that I cannot write unless there was something lost, and if I don't have something lost, I have to manufacture the loss, in order to make myself write. So I cannot write towards the future, I can only write towards the past, if that's what you mean. So the loss of Alexandria is emblematic, up to a certain point, because I think we all have other things that sort of come into place, besides a particular place that I never really liked. That's the big thing, is that I don't-- **(laughter)**

**COLM TÓIBÍN:** Yes, but it was the rich way of disliking it, that really mattered. **(laughter)**

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** It was a very eloquent dislike, **(laughter)** like the people I hate, you know, which, we won't do that.

**COLM TÓIBÍN:** But it probably is also the case with you, that those early books that you read, perhaps mattered to you just as much as certain experiences. Is that possible?

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** Yes. Yes. The books that I read were--and I'm going to ask you the same question--the books that I read were read because I wanted to put myself on some kind of landscape that had meaning. I was in Egypt reading books and clearly, when you're in Egypt, you're not only in the periphery, you're outside of civilization as you know it, because what's out in the street is nothing that makes sense. So you read books about Russia, and you read books about France in the nineteenth century, and that gives

you an anchor, just as when I used to read the Greeks, it anchored me in some kind of tradition that I could claim, truly or not, that it was mine. And that brings me to the same question for you, because I remember the first thing that I did, and I quoted it to you, just to see who you were, because I had met him, at the Dorothy Cullman, Lewis and Dorothy Cullman Center for a whole year, and he came late, and we will describe why he came late, and we started speaking to each other, and I said, oh this guy comes from Ireland and he's very well-read, he has spent his whole childhood reading and adolescence reading, and we checked each other's books, many of the same books--but then I said, "The Listeners." Do you remember, I asked you about "The Listeners"? How many of you know the poem "The Listeners"?

**COLM TÓIBÍN:** "'Is there anybody there?' said the traveler, knocking on the moonlit door; and his horse in the silence chomped the grasses of the forest's ferny floor. And a bird flew up out of the turret, above the traveler's head: and he smote upon the door a second time; 'Is there anybody there?' he said."

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** Yes, exactly! "Tell them I came!"

**COLM TÓIBÍN:** "'Tell them I came, and no one answered, that I kept my word,'" he said."

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** That's it, see, this is it. I said, this is magnificent. This man, whatever his cultural trajectory, merged with mine because we had gone to, I bet, the same kind of latter-day British schools, or the remnants of British schools, that had, in one way or another, molded us, and that we were forced to accept that mold, and yet from that mold decided to go our separate ways. And I wondered, I mean, you write in one of the short stories, there is a sense of a priest that--you also wrote about this in The London Review, about having experiences in school, and I was wondering if that is your DNA, your template.

**COLM TÓIBÍN:** No, I think that reading and writing was a way of surviving. And that therefore simply became a mechanism whereby I lived. But the template would be also in loss. I didn't lose Alexandria, I didn't--what Elizabeth Bishop calls, you know, "I lost two continents." I didn't lose a country. But I was brought up in a house where my father, through a stroke, lost his voice when I was eight, and lived for four more years. And it was very difficult because it was considered at the time, I suppose, that one didn't talk about these things. So I never had a conversation with anybody, just one day, he had a voice, and then, we were away, and then he didn't have one. And then four years later he died and we didn't even talk about that much.

So that reading in silence, writing in silence, and living in silence, became, I suppose, all part of the same thing, that you didn't ever discuss. It wasn't done, to discuss anything that was really on your mind. You know, so that you left everything unsaid, and you learned to read things in silence, what was going on, and people learned to read you as well as they could, and sometimes they failed. And this became terribly useful when you're writing stories and novels, because you can constantly play a dram over the unspoken, the withheld, and the unsaid. Where somebody desperately wants to turn and say it, and they don't. They might, but they don't. Where Henry James is about to feel something, **(laughter)** and then he doesn't feel it **(laughter).** Where he would like to talk to someone but he watches them from a window instead. And that this became, you know, artistically useful, but it arose from something very specific and real.

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** Did it mean that reading for you was not just a way of--did it help you anchor yourself in something real, since the family life was so silent?

**COLM TÓIBÍN:** Well, that house was full of books, and my father wrote local history, and you know, the images of him at a table working away, notes and books, and my mother kept her books apart from his books, they were poetry books. And so that business of--it was a small house, but books were really important. And I couldn't read until I was about nine, and my younger brother, who was four years younger, could read before me. And they were so relieved that I could read, because they thought I was just a

fool, and that therefore anytime I read, no matter what time of the night it was, or what book it was, it was fine. And that became a way of willing approval.

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** And is that, I mean, clearly there's Henry James behind--your description of Henry James as if...your back does not hurt, does it?

**COLM TÓIBÍN:** No, but I am the second son in a family of five, where the older brother is athletic, you know, and that marks you, just like being an only child marks you, in certain ways for life, that you always have that shadow of someone who's stronger than you are, who's better than you are at going out and ruining fences and playing games, whereas you want to be in the kitchen with your mother **(laughter).**

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** Well, that was--because I always, when I read the book on Henry James, one has a feeling that you really merged with him and that the identity of one becomes inseparable from the other.

**COLM TÓIBÍN:** I think that Henry James actually personally was much funnier than I made him **(laughter)**. You know, what you hear about him, he was good company, and that he was very witty. But I realized that if I did that, I'd make him a sort of Oscar Wilde figure and I had to sort of get rid of that. And André, when I got this book, and I was really shocked by it, and I'd love to know first of all, did this book, which is your first novel, which is *Call Me By Your Name*, when did you write it or how did it start?

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** I wrote it two years ago, I woke up one morning and I think it was just after we had decided that we weren't going to go to Italy, so the Italian landscape of the book is extremely important. It becomes tangential because you can locate this book more or less anywhere with slight alterations. But to be in Italy, this was the thing. So I woke up one morning and I had this...April feeling, that anybody who is from Egypt, if anybody is from Egypt in this room--don't raise your hand **(laughter).** But it's a feeling that you automatically have, or for anybody who's grown by the beach, where the beach is part of your life, you know exactly what I'll mean. There are certain days, and they

come in early spring, when you suddenly feel today is the day to go to the beach. And you know it and you call each other and you say to one another, it's a beach day, isn't it? Yes it is. And I woke up at 6 o'clock as I always do and I said, today is a beach day, and I wanted to go to the beach, and I suddenly realized that I didn't want to write the book I was writing. At least I wanted to put it on hold, and I wanted to do--

**COLM TÓIBÍN:** Was that a novel?

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** It was a novel, which you heard parts of. And I decided to do something totally different. And I had started a book that was taking place in Portugal. The problem was Portugal, was that I'd never been there **(laughter).** And it was about a woman, who was longing for the man in the hotel next door, and the problem with me, that I didn't know much of what women felt, for men. So I had to sort of go back to the drawing board and then create something, and it came quite easily, actually, the book was written in four months, so. And it was very easy until there was a--

**COLM TÓIBÍN:** But was it written in a New York summer?

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** Yes. I stayed in New York for that summer.

**COLM TÓIBÍN:** So in fact not having the Italian summer gave you the book.

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** Yes. I mean that's the beginning of--yes.

**COLM TÓIBÍN:** And that part, even though you're sort of coy about naming it, but it is the Italian Riviera.

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** It is the Italian--I never say that, do I?

**COLM TÓIBÍN:** Well, it's clear the Italian Riviera. But did you live there, I mean is that--

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** I've passed--no, I've been there. And I've passed by there. So I know those little towns. And--but you know, if you know one of them, they're all the same. People from those towns don't believe that **(laughter)**.

**COLM TÓIBÍN:** But there are elements, remind the name of the place in Egypt, there are elements of that summer house, and of moving to a place for the summer, of guests coming, of the beach, of you know, the pleasures surrounding the sun and the beach, that you're in all summer--

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** Yes. Oh, yes. That's very much there. Very much there. So I did, in many ways--I mean, I know beach houses, and they're more or less all the same, and the culture on the Mediterranean is more or less the same. So I did what I could to cobble together this vision of this town.

**COLM TÓIBÍN:** And he's a seventeen year-old boy, Elio, and he has a brother, the brother's away, but he's more or less an only child for the purposes of the book. And he's very smart in one way, and he knows loads of poetry, he knows how to transcribe music, and he's sitting at the adult table, which is something that, for example, might not happen so much now, but certainly I remember the notion of you know, that from a certain age, you sit with the adults and you eat with the adults and you join in the conversation if you can. He's very clever in one way and emotionally in another way, he's quite not as precocious as he is intellectually. He's quite confused, he doesn't know--he's doesn't, for example, know the effect he has on people. And I don't think the reader knows. The reader's not meant to know. You're supposed to watch the whole novel through the eyes of the young kid. And you think, yes, I'm thinking of the reader. The reader thinking, This seventeen year-old boy sets his sights on a twenty-four year-old graduate student who's a man, who comes to visit the house and stays for six weeks, sets his sights on him in a very determined sort of way, and--

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** Yes. And, I mean, I can tell you that when I was in Egypt as a kid, and the whole Jewish question comes in, maybe I should discuss this a bit. This is a young man from America, he feels very good about being Jewish, he's "okay," he always uses that expression, "I'm okay with this," "I'm okay with that." He's totally cavalier about almost everything. And one of the things is he's got this Star of David on his chest, on a necklace, and this is something that the young Elio, who is also Jewish, would never do. And I remember when I was a kid, where in Egypt you could really not claim you were a Jew, never tell anyone, or show anyone that you were Jewish. So I would always hide my Star of David, but this young man doesn't. And I knew another young man in Egypt who also never hid his Star of David. So he was quite relaxed about it, and I always envied him, and I wanted to know what his secret was, and I wanted to become his friend, because he was much older, he couldn't care anything about me. But I was always looking out for him to find out what is it that gives him that kind of strength to be Jewish in a country where it's totally dangerous to be. And that was I think the beginning of the obsession that the young character Elio has in the novel.

**COLM TÓIBÍN:** And--what happens when you get to know a writer and you read a writer's novel is you realize that so much of the time, novels are not autobiographical necessarily, although they contain houses, certain people, certain moments, certain weather that's real. And that you sort of built on it, but this is terribly interesting for a psychoanalyst, for example, that you don't build on in a random way, you don't even build on with full artistry, but you're somehow being controlled by forces within you that actually almost build it for you, that there are only certain stories you can tell, and this novel is framed, in other words, just like the book *Out of Egypt* is framed: it begins and ends with loss. That, in other words, this is a golden summer, remembered years later, time lost. Past. Opportunities lost. And it has all that sense written all over it, doesn't it.

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** Yes. And basically if you want to read it that way, a whole lifetime lost, because they have parted and they are not coming together, and that's it. And that's, I think, the hard lesson. But then, you know, this is how we live. Writers, when I asked you how long, when did this certain story come to your mind, or when did you begin to tinker

with it, we both go at least ten years, it goes back a long, long time. In other words, you incubate these things forever, until they suddenly burst. And I was wondering if you could give us an example of a story that you've been sort of mulling, and mulling again and again, and maybe you're not done with it.

**COLM TÓIBÍN:** Well, there's a story in this book, in *Mothers and Sons*, for example, which is called "A Priest in the Family." And it's--it really is, I hope it's the distillation and the end, because if I have to go one more with this, I'll really go out of my mind. And that--I was in a school in Ireland called St. Peter's College. This school became famous because a good number of the priests went to jail, and--for having sex with minors. And they are in Ireland now the most hated figures in the country: Father Collins, who taught me how to develop photographs, for example, was recently, and the Pope wrote to him to tell him he's no longer allowed to say Mass, hear confessions, or take any--his priestly duties are finished. And I wrote the first chapter of a novel ten years ago about such a priest who would twenty years after the event get a letter from a lawyer to say, I represent so-and-so who was one of your students. You interfered with him sexually. He is suing you. And he would open this letter, and you can just imagine, we can all imagine, how he would feel. This must go away, it's twenty years ago, it's too long ago, it could hardly matter now. And then suddenly he moves from being the most respected person in the society to being the least respected person in the society.

And I thought, a novel about the progress, as watched by another student who, as I did, had a very good relationship with him, would be a novel that the more I worked on it I the more I thought, A journalist could write this. You know, that a newspaper article could equally cover this. And then I thought of doing it from the victim's side, of somebody desperately trying to get on with their lives while this in the background and it won't go away, these images of nights going back across--you know, across this old school, going back to your bed alone, with something strange having happened to you, and that strangeness lurking inside you for twenty years until it comes out in alcoholism, or in all sorts of difficulties. I thought a journalist could do that too. And so that the only story I could get, which is only five thousand words, was what would it be like if you

were the mother of the priest, and if you were a woman of great independence of mind, and of spirit, about eighty years old, living a life that was very independent in Ireland, and this news came that your son the priest was going to go to jail and was going to be disgraced, what would that look like from her point of view.

And of course, the first thing you do, because the mind is so lazy, is you go home. I didn't use our house; I used a friend of mine's house. I wanted a bungalow, I didn't want stairs. But I did give the woman some of the things my mother did, such as the gramophone society on a Thursday night, that this woman goes to. Some of those details were straight from the life my mother was living, more or less the time I was conceiving the story. But, so that the story really was ten years in the making and that it went through any number of changes, and that everything in it, what I was saying earlier, when the son and the mother finally confront each other, I wished I was writing a Brazilian soap opera where I could have them screaming at each other, but they say almost nothing to each other when they meet, they have a meeting where she just says--almost asks him if he'd like tea, and then he goes, and nothing.

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** Yes. Very dramatic, and it's really one of the more powerful ones in the story. Let me ask you another question about--you said something about the DNA coding which is something that was lost and if I asked you a similar question about the troubling spots in your life and because I have a feeling that this book is totally unified, again, around two centers or like sort of an ellipse: two foci. And there is two troubled individuals compelled to have dealings with one another, without really seeming to want to, and there is that one short story, very, very short one, about a mother who's famous for singing, and she sings in a bar but she's abandoned her child, and the child, now a grown man, is in the same bar, and he knows this is his mother and he wonders if she has recognized him. And the friends say, Come on, go and talk to your mother, that's your mother. And he says, No, let me--I'll join you guys in the car, you come and join me in the car, I'm going to start the car. And he leaves. There's this kind of troubling silence in those stories. Because when you read about a title like this one, *Mothers and Sons*, I automatically think of sons and lovers, which is a totally different relationship between

the mother and son. She's totally nursing him, she's nurturing him, and when she dies, he's ready to go out in the world and face it with some degree of courage. This is much more somber.

**COLM TÓIBÍN:** Yeah, I think that some of the stories are elegiac, I mean I realize with that story, which is very short, that it's really about the underworld. It's about a world where you might not recognize somebody. It's like that Rilke poem about Orpheus and Euredice, that maybe someone or other was ahead, and you wouldn't quite know who it was, in the underworld. And I was dealing with, I suppose, with my mother's death. I mean, Henry James has a wonderful, wonderful letter after his mother died, just simply just saying, it is--the only comfort you get from these things is they cannot happen twice. that they happen merely once. And I suppose it you're a writer, it's impossible that they wouldn't get into your work, no matter how hard you would try to keep them out or think that you weren't writing directly about them, that they would make their way into that.

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** Yeah.

**COLM TÓIBÍN:** And did you have any shadows when you were writing this book--I'm thinking, for example, of James Baldwin. I'm thinking of Thomas Mann, I'm thinking of something like *Death in Venice*. I'm thinking of, say, that there's a description which Thomas Mann's wife has of being in Venice with him in 1911 and actually some of the outlines of what happens in the story *Death in Venice* happening. But of course he didn't follow anyone through the streets of Venice, but nonetheless she saw him watching something, she saw him watching the boy, and that in turn became the story. And that idea of Mann working very obliquely, or James Baldwin in something like *Another Country* where no one is gay or straight in *Another Country*. And even Rufus at the beginning, he has as girlfriend and a boyfriend and that that ambiguity, that sexual ambiguity, it's what nourishes those books very much. But some of this book is very, very sexually explicit. I mean, I'm gay, and I must say, some of these I had never thought of myself **(laughter)**--and I can assure you that I hate the term "the gay community" because it sounds like a community of nuns or something **(laughter)**--but that some of

the things in this book will be there forever in the gay community, mentioned regularly as possible new things one could do **(laughter)**. And I mean, as I was reading it I was going, Wow, wow, André. **(laughter)** And therefore, and of course I wasn't just thinking about me reading it, I was thinking about, you wrote this book? **(laughter)**

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** Nobody else does. But you know, you mentioned other books and there is one book in particular that--it was for me very much like Thomas Mann, except the roles are reversed. It were as if the young Tadzio was stalking a much younger version of Aschenbach. And very interested in the Aschenbach character, you don't even know what they feel. The graduate student, or the postdoc, is really, you have no idea what he's after, what he wants, he doesn't probably even realize what's going on with the young man, and I wanted the young man to be compelled in his imagination, and later, in real experience, by what he wanted. He never says, "I love." He says, "I want." And I think that is what I was going to go after, this compulsion.

**COLM TÓIBÍN:** And were you alert, writing this book in America now, that that idea, that the body is a temple of pleasure, that a seventeen year-old, we must reenter fully into his spirit. The reader fully wants to have a wonderful time with his body, and that he never feels--he feels slight guilt. The American says, we mustn't do this because it would be very wrong. But our hero, the seventeen year-old, feels that only as a sort of new pleasure, he feels shame is a sort of pleasure, and never for long, I should say. Were you alert to the fact that writing a book like that in America now, is almost a political statement?

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** No. **(laughter)** I wasn't, I didn't think very much, because you made a comment on the telephone months ago, which was truly enlightening because it happened to be totally true. I was going to write a novel that was modeled after Dorothy Strachey’s book, which is really--

**COLM TÓIBÍN:** Could you tell us about that book?

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** Yes, okay. It's a book called *Olivia* which I beg all of you to go and buy, it's, you probably won't find it, because people publish it and then it goes out of business again, it goes out of print, and nobody stays in business. All the publishing houses that publish it don't stay long, for some reason, yet it's a beautiful book because it was instantly translated in French by Roger Martin du Gard, which is a very, very famous writer, and totally idolized in France. In America, never heard of it. It's a story of a girl who goes to a school for girls, and falls in love, or has a crush, you don't know, on her headmistress. And the headmistress also seems to respond, but with totally stoicism, says, you know, this is enough, we've said all we have to say, now go back to bed. And she distances herself, very--almost cruelly, from the child. The child--she's, I don't know how old she is, sixteen, seventeen. And that was the model of the story, I was going to write this story, sort of a kind of blend of *Olivia*, *Death in Venice*, and who knows what else. And Flaubert's *November*, too, was in the background.

But then I decided, as you very well said, and he said, Colm said, I knew as I was reading this book that at some point there was going to be a death. Something terrible was going to happen. And indeed, at the beginning, I was planning to do just that, to have one of the characters die. It wasn't going to be Elio, since he's the narrator, it was going to be the American, he was going to die--drowned, as Shelley drowns. And then I said, No. And I don't know why I said no. I said, No, let's make them at least have a conversation. And then I said, Well, that's kind of stupid. If they're going to have a conversation, they might as well go through the act. And I made that happen, and then I said, oh, the act is interesting. Let's have more of it. **(laughter)** And the next thing you know, is every conceivable position, though I don't describe any positions, I think.

**COLM TÓIBÍN:** You do. **(laughter)**

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** I do, thank you! **(laughter)** But then there are other things that happen that are, I don't know why I did it.

**COLM TÓIBÍN:** You decided deliberately not to punish them.

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** Oh, absolutely, absolutely. This was going to be very silly, to have them sort of persecuted by the crowd, or to be punished for having enjoyed illicit sex--

**COLM TÓIBÍN:** Or to have one of them punished by death.

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** Yes.

**COLM TÓIBÍN:** That in other words, two men fall in love, one of them will die. And you deliberately decided to actually rewrite that narrative.

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** Yes. As I got closer to it, I got to like them. **(laughter)** I wanted them to have fun. You know, I wanted to--I was the camera sort of watching everything they did. So there was nothing that was going to stop me from doing that.

**COLM TÓIBÍN:** You know, in E.M. Forster account of writing *Maurice*, and he said that there was such pressure on him because other novels of the time, and French novels, which dealt with two men who fell in love, there would always have to be a suicide, that you're building up to suicide. And in Morris, he was going to make these two men utterly happy, quite incredibly happy, I mean, unbelievably happy, I mean, the reader does not believe how happy they are **(laughter),** and that this, I mean, I have a feeling that you didn't follow the debates going on among gay men about novels written about gay people in the 60s and 70s, that you were reading Proust, perhaps, at that time. **(laughter)**

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** Yes, yes.

**COLM TÓIBÍN:** But I mean, this debate was a very real and serious one, over what do you do if you have two gay men and they fall in love, because if you punish one of them by death or suicide, you're actually fulfilling a narrative that is written for them by the world. But on the other hand, if you're trying to make them so blissfully happy by the

end, no Brokeback, no mountain, just happiness, **(laughter)** then that's you being political rather than you being an artist, so that everybody was caught in that.

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** Right, right, you know, I don't read newspapers, more or less, and I hardly ever read magazines, and I'm not really always interested in what contemporary writers do, so I don't know. And I'm not interested in what people are doing, and I wanted to do just that, to just take this narrative as far as I knew how to take it. And there was a point in which, okay, they've made love, they've done all those things, now what? And at that point I said, well, now they have to discover something else. And it was the third chapter, which nobody ever comments on, partly because there's almost no sex in it (**laughter)**, and because it's the most difficult chapter, because it's at that point that you realize that the young man is, in fact, discovering what he would like to do for the rest of his life. He's in a bookish world, he's in a world surrounded by writers, suddenly they're having a big party, a big dinner, to honor a poet, and suddenly he says, I want to be here. I don't want to go to college, this is an education, I want this life for the rest of my life. Now, you don't know whether he gets that life or not, I certainly don't, but it was the consequence of this liberation that opens up the admission that he wants to be an artist.

**COLM TÓIBÍN:** Yeah, that if you were doing an anthology of nights on the town, that night they have in Rome, when they go there the first night, the party, the irony, the glitter, the glamour, I mean, it is absolutely wonderful description, they're so happy together.

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** Yes, they're happy.

**COLM TÓIBÍN:** I presume you haven't been following any of these arguments, I presume you're a total--I mean, I presume you come to write this novel as a total innocent, because when you mentioned what you were doing in '68, and '69, you seem--what was happening here in '68 and '69 was that men were saying, Look, I've had sex with another man. That is my identity from now on. It's like being a race. It is the banner under which I will march from now on. I am gay, as a result of having had sex with a

man, and you move from that position. And your characters--it doesn't even occur to them, from this moment onwards, I am a new identity. Isn't that right?

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** Right. Absolutely not.

**COLM TÓIBÍN:** Did you do that deliberately, or did you just not know? **(laughter)**

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** Probably I didn't know, but I also did it deliberately. **(laughter)** I didn't want to go to all the stops on this *via crucis*. I didn't want to go through all the predictable stops. Not that my book is not in anyway unpredictable, but I didn't want to visit and pay homage to, okay, are we going to do anything about AIDS, or not? Okay, well do we have to mention--well, this book happens to occur in 1986, so what do we do? Well, AIDS exists, and they obviously know about it, so they have to mention--they don't mention it.

**COLM TÓIBÍN:** It's mentioned in passing.

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** In passing. When he is a bit doped up and he says, you know, "Did I ask you if you were okay?" The young man says, "Yes, you did." "Did I tell you I was okay?" "Yes, you did." Basically, he doesn't remember. Because this was a way of kind of smuggling that part of it, and saying, Okay, peace, everybody, we're going on with the sex scene, okay? **(laughter)** But I didn't want to politicize it; I'm not interested in any of the politics, in any of the partisanship that automatically involved whenever you write a book like that.

**COLM TÓIBÍN:** I have a story in this book of stories called "Three Friends" in which they go on a big orgy of drugs and I read from it in Dublin, and I knew, as soon as I started, and I certainly knew by the end, because everyone just came up to me and said, "Did you take all those drugs? I mean, is that you?" And that question of course, it was easy to answer, saying, no, I was invited to a rave--do they call them raves in America? Are they called raves?

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** I don't know.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** Yes.

**COLM TÓIBÍN:** Yes, I was invited to a rave but I neglected to go, I mean, I meant to go, but I stayed at home that night instead, and I always imagined afterwards what it might have been like. So the story became, instead of being a direct result of something I had, it was something I lost, or didn't have, or meant to have. And the sex in the scene, similar in the Irish scene, you know, I don't know if you imagine what that might be like, **(laughter)** but you know, what I'm saying is, that when you read something which is quite explicit, either about drugs or about sex or about rock and roll, that people automatically look at you and say, "But was that you? Is that you there?" and what I want to ask you now is-- **(laughter)** that if you read *Out of Egypt* and you read this book, you realize that you have found, that this book is, almost exquisitely autobiographical, in that you have gone once more, you have found perfection, you've found Alexandria again, the golden summer, that it's full of detail, it's full of rich detail, it's full of meals had, abundance of various sorts, it's full of culture. And what you're going to do with it, actually, is you're going to miss. He's going to miss it, and miss it. And the--it's only being described so you can describe what it was like to miss it. And that it's a metaphor--the book is a metaphor, or it's very much an autobiographical novel in that you've found a story with which to tell your story. Is that true?

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** Yes, it sounds right. **(laughter)** No, but it's good, and I think it applies to your story as well. You wanted to go to the rave, or you might have toyed with the idea, but it didn't happen. And therefore it became almost interesting to explore, as an idea, as a thing to do fiction with.

**COLM TÓIBÍN:** So we had no trouble making up the title of this. The minute "eros" came--"loss" doesn't quite rhyme with it, by the way, I mean, it nearly makes it, but it's sort of a funny rhyme, it's an off rhyme--but the minute "eros" came, both of us were able

easily to say, Well, it wouldn't be "Eros and Happiness," "Eros and Joy," or indeed, "Eros and Misery," it was "Eros--

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** --"and Loss." Because eros, I think, just to find the logic of something that came up at the spur of the moment, eros is looking towards something, you desire something, and loss is exactly the opposite move, when you look back to something that you've had, and that you've lost. Ultimately, I think they're the same gesture, but in two different directions. And, well.

**COLM TÓIBÍN:** Did you, did the book surprise you? I mean, as you were working on, some nights, thinking, God, I've just written this scene, it's gonna really--I mean, did, were there days like that? **(laughter)**

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** Yes, because it still happens, I go and read it again, and I say, My God. **(laughter)** And I ask myself what possessed me, which is even worse, because what possessed me to do this, okay, I've had them do this, I've them do that, and they've done that, together, alone, with other people, and now they're going to do this, do they need to do this? There's a scene at the very end of the Roman night, when young Elio has had everything to drink, sort of together, so he plays the piano for the people, and at some point he says, You know, I need to go out and get some air, and Oliver goes with him and says, You know, maybe you should try to throw up, and he does, he vomits, but I said, well, is this it? Do I have to describe it? But I do have a scene in which Oliver holds Elio's head, as he is getting sick, and I wanted that to be a gesture of utter affection. To be in the moment when the two realize that there's something going on. And then, of course, Oliver makes a joke, he says, "Do you ever chew your peas?" **(laughter)**

**COLM TÓIBÍN:** I think for any parent of a seventeen-year old, (laughter) this would be a very useful book, in the sense that just as the seventeen-year old pursues an older man, every seventeen-year old in the world should hand this to their parents, saying, Yeah, this is me. **(laughter)** And you know, this is how it's going to be. So in that sense, when, at the end of the summer, it's all over, and he comes back like a drowned rat from Rome,

and he's really sad, he's the saddest boy in Italy at this point, and his father sees him, and of course you've been thinking all along, because of the noise they're making, and also because Elio's not good at disguising himself: he blushes, his nose bleeds, he shows his feelings very openly, when he doesn't mean to, anyway his father of course has been watching this. Now you think, Now the trouble's going to start, now we're going to have Brokeback, you know, now we're going to have the father saying, You. And it's absolutely beautiful, the father says, "Look, you had a beautiful friendship, maybe more than a friendship, and I envy you. In my place, most parents would hope the whole thing goes away, or pray that their sons land on their feet soon enough, but I am not such a parent. In your place, if there is pain, nurse it. If there is a flame, don't snuff it out, don't be brutal with it.

And then he goes on, he says, "Let me say one more thing, it will clear the air, I may have come close, but I never had what you had. Something always held me back or stood in the way. How you live your life is your business, but remember, our hearts and our bodies are given to us only once. Most of us can't help but live as though we've got two lives to live, one is a mockup and the other a finished version, and there are all those versions in between. But there's only one, and before you know it, your heart is worn out." And it's this absolutely beautiful speech at the end, which you feel--and that has a, for any parent, in America especially, with the way in which Puritanism has come back to universities, for example, has come back into the public domain in America--to publish this book in America, if you're telling me it's not a political act, it is only a political act in that it's so political that it didn't occur to you how political it is, but that speech is actually a very important statement of something which you clearly mean.

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** Yes, no, of course, I couldn't possibly not mean it. It's the kind of speech that, had it occurred, my father would have given me. And it's, yes, and it's the kind of speech I would want to make to my children, should it occur. Absolutely, absolutely. And I think it's very important. The opposite would be to force people back into some kind of weird, nebulous environment, which I think everybody's out of. And I second that, which brings me to some point I would like to make, because there is a

moment in your book which happens I think as a consequence of the young man who is the first protagonist. He's been in jail, and he's learned something in jail, and I have a feeling that we're not talking just of jail, we're talking also of school, and it is--it's what I meant when I said there is some troubling spot in this book that is pervasive and radiates all over the place, and maybe it's my turn to read something of yours, if I may.

**COLM TÓIBÍN:** Keep it short. **(laughter)**

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** Page one. **(laughter)** But it's such a beautiful--and I think is in the Henry James, as much, but here it is. "When he had finally let--when he was finally let out of Lanfad"--that's the prison.

**COLM TÓIBÍN:** Juvenile detention.

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** Okay. "He brought with him the feeling that behind everything lay something else. A hidden motive perhaps, or something unimaginable and dark, that a person was merely a disguise for another person, that something said was merely code for something else. There were always layers, and beyond them, even more secret layers, which you could chance upon, or which would become more apparent the closer you look." I mean, there is it is.

**COLM TÓIBÍN:** See, that happened in the sense that that story, which is the first story in the book, it's about an Irish criminal called Martin Cahill, who's called The General, John Boorman made a film about him. And when I was a journalist I wrote him a letter, and no journalist had ever thought of writing, "Dear Mr. Cahill" to him before and he was amused at the letter and he agreed to see me. And I had a number of sessions with him, where I had no interest in his crimes, I was only interested in his childhood. And he had never, ever talked about his life like that before. He presumed I wanted to know who did what, what robbery--he at the time had a Vermeer in the Dublin mountains, hidden, and a lot of people wanted to know quite where in the Dublin mountains it was and what he

hoped to do with it, you know, it's a beautiful Vermeer, it's a girl reading a letter near a window which he'd stolen from Lady Beit.

And the session were very, very intense, they were so intense in the end that the only thing he could do with after about three days was put a loaded sawn-off shotgun in my bedroom. I have no idea how he knew where I lived or anything, but he did put a loaded sawn-off shotgun into my bedroom--thank you Martin, he's dead now--and because he was very frightened at the amount that he'd said, and the amount of self that he'd given, but one of the things he told me about was watching the brothers who were meant to be in charge, believing at first they were serious authority figures, believing in their authority, and slowly realizing there was something else involved all the time. That there was sadism involved, that there was sexual interest involved, that their authority was gnarled and strange, and that he watched that.

And he talked to me almost like a figure out of a Graham Greene novel who had become alert to that and it frightened him. And I couldn't do anything with it as a journalist, it was of no use to me, it was all too hard to describe, you know, in a magazine article. So I waited for twenty years, and I put it in, and it was on my mind always, that I would write his story. Obviously you can imagine how I felt when John Boorman made a film about him, you know, that I thought, God, that's the end of me, but then I didn't go to the film, and I just--I was interested in him, almost as a writer, or as a figure who had certain interesting thoughts in his life, which had lead to crimes, but I wasn't interested in the crimes, so that that encounter was terribly important for me.

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** But this is you speaking, or is it him? This sense that everything is something else.

**COLM TÓIBÍN:** See, no, he told me that, and I listened really carefully, and I never forgot anything he said to me. Because in those days, I felt I had met my match for a change. You know what I mean?

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** Yes.

**COLM TÓIBÍN:** That I had met someone who actually excited me, whose mind excited me and whose ways of thinking excited me. And I think he felt the same about--I mean, in other words, he felt the same about he questions I was asking, interested him. And I didn't ever put any thought before into ideas of a criminal as an interesting figure, I just thought they were violent thugs, until I met him and I never met anyone else like him. And he interested me enormously.

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** Well, he does to us to. Anyway, I think we are--

**COLM TÓIBÍN:** Yeah, we're, so we're going to take questions, and we have a--

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** The microphone is on the right-hand side, and we ask you to ask questions rather than make statements, and after that, André and Colm will sign books on the right-hand side.

**COLM TÓIBÍN:** We don't mind statements, do we?

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** No, statements is fine.

**COLM TÓIBÍN:** Paul, we don't mind statements either, I mean.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** You don't mind statements?

**COLM TÓIBÍN:** No, no.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Okay, then statements and a few questions. But the mike is on the right-hand side.

**Q:** You brought up this point about these political debates, to have a happy ending and so on, but there's, can be another motive, which is not so much--you talked about how that was, the danger was becoming a propagandist rather than an artist, but there can be another motive besides politics, which is simply wish fulfillment. And I'm just wondering whether either of you have any sense of the risk as an artist of indulging one's desire to, you know, have a happy ending, say, as being self-indulgent. And a second question, I just was curious if you had read Stanley Fish's blog in the New York Times about your comments on the radio about autobiography and I was just wondering what your opinion was on what he had to say about, you know, what the real purpose of writing is.

**COLM TÓIBÍN:** Henry James told Lady Gregory that one of the pleasures, for him, of writing, was giving his characters so much money **(laughter)** that it really, you know, Isabel Archer's inheritance wasn't something he made up for no reason, he just loved giving her all the money, and he loved Milly Theale being so rich, and just that business of making your characters rich. And I suppose giving your characters loads of sex, you know, especially when you're sitting at home, **(laughter)** by definition, I mean, everyone else is out sunbathing or gone off to Coney Island or somewhere, and you're sitting at home writing, that almost--that it's always an aspect of writing which is that, giving your character something that you--making your character able steal a Vermeer when you couldn't dream of stealing a Vermeer.

So, yes, I mean, certainly for me, that's there somewhere, and has to be very carefully controlled, because I did read the Stanley Fish thing, and it was when I had said that I didn't believe that writing or reading were forms of therapy, that I believed that in writing that there are elements of artistry and deliberation, of a made object, in which the writer really at times, I was mentioning being controlled by certain forces but that you also, in a really odd way, control, too, you could put the word "not" into any sentence you please when it isn't there if you want to, and leave it there. And you have to also be able to shape and make yourself. You're not just being dictated to by some force you can't control, although you are to some extent, but that the shaping imagination is not the patient on the couch with the therapist. It is an entirely different matter. And there is almost no

relationship. And that it's terribly important to remember that, that first of all, writing is not typing, but writing is also not speaking to your shrink, either. It's something quite deliberate and made, and you must go on with that belief. It's terribly important. I don't know what you think.

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** Oh, I totally agree. I think that one of the quarrels I have with some people is that they believe that there is a total adjacency between who you are and what you write, or what you feel and what you end up writing. It's not at all like that. I think that we all have, I mean, I'm sure if I asked people to raise their hands and asked, How many of you think that you're sick and twisted? You would probably all want to raise your hands but you know better than to do that, okay? But I think we all walk around with a big chaos in our head, I mean a really disgusting and sickening chaos in our heads, and in our hearts. And let's stop there. **(laughter)**

But this chaos is probably quite authentic, I don't care. The chaos has to be given a shape, it has to be controlled, it has to ultimately be stylized into something that is, you know that has all the virtues of harmony, and symmetry, and order, and control above all things. Otherwise it's nothing, it's just what you dreamt. And all of us know, there's nothing more boring--there's two very boring things, one is somebody telling you what their dreams are, which I think is extremely boring and I never want to hear, or how they cooked a particular meal. **(laughter)** I don't care. These are extremely boring things. However, you give that dream a shape, you basically tinker and tamper with it, so much that ultimately it has a magnitude and it begins to become luminous. Or it resonates with something else--at that point, you say, Oh, wow, that's quite beautiful. And I think that's what we aim for, as sort of merchants of words. We want to attain a degree of beauty that is not really there when you have it as an experience. So that one can be totally different from the other. I think that I'm much more proud of what I have written in my life than of what I have done. I mean, even if they're the same things, it's on paper that it becomes real to me, even if it has been falsified on paper.

I've intimidated everyone. No.

**COLM TÓIBÍN:** No, we haven't. Look.

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** Oh, another person.

**Q:** This might fall into the category of pure gossipy prurient curiosity, but I have to ask. Is there any historical or empirical evidence for sex between Oliver Wendell Holmes and Henry James? **(laughter)**

**COLM TÓIBÍN:** Yes. Henry James, at that time, writes a letter Oliver Wendell Holmes to say, there is only one bed. We have searched everywhere for other rooms. There will only be one bed. And then he adds the phrase, "And I don't mind, if you don't, as the woman said when the puppy dog licked her face." **(laughter)** And it's there as a letter. Now, Sheldon Novick, in his book called The Young Master, suggests that Henry James and Oliver Wendell Holmes had sex in Boston. I don't find that evidence as just very convincing. But I find the letter very interesting, because if Oliver Wendell Holmes had been through the Civil War, and had been with men for those number of years, sleeping with another man might not mean much to him. But poor Henry, of course, had his own room, or if he didn't have his own room, William was around and he certainly didn't want to sleep with William. **(laughter)**

And the notion of somebody, and anyone who's gay and maybe even people who are straight know this feeling, that you get into bed with somebody when you're that age, late teens, early twenties, and you know, it could be a single bed and you don't sleep. And they might sleep or might not sleep. So that all I know was, there was one bed for that night, and then all I did was, I imagined what went on in Henry James's mind for all that night, as Holmes moved around and wasn't clear what he was doing or not doing. And also was trying to imagine for Holmes, even if something happening wouldn't have meant much. For James it would have meant everything. So that, the evidence is that, but I did obviously take a tiny detail from a letter, I have Henry James saying it to him eventually, in the bedroom, about the bed, "Well, I don't mind, if you don't, as the woman said when

the puppy dog licked her face," God. But, so that's the evidence, so it doesn't come from nowhere, but obviously, I was writing a novel, a biographer would have to be very, very careful with that material. And I'm not a biographer.

**Q:** I wanted to ask you, this has mostly been about the personal fields, and you have, a little bit I think, disclaimed any kind of global themes, but particularly, I've only read André's book *Out of Egypt*, and it strikes me as such an allegory to what's happening in Egypt today, and this foreshadowing of this complete loss that they will eventually have of their own country, and every person who lives in Egypt is kind of experiencing. And I don't know that that many Egyptians have actually read your novel or your book, but I think it's very particular to that experience, and so I wondered if you could speak maybe, whether you think that it is has any kind of translation to, you know, Ireland or Egypt, or to any of these countries themselves as a kind of national consciousness, are kind of losing themselves entirely.

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** It was about Ireland, I think. **(laughter)** I don't think I understand the question totally, but I'm going to take a guess. You're saying that, does my book have, let's use the word, any relevance today, in the Middle East or should they be aware of it, as their country's literally slipping away, as I said in the book, back into the desert? Yes, that's my feeling. It is really, it's very difficult for Egyptians to understand that there is no future. And I mean, you've seen the article in the Times about ten days ago, how Cairo is kind of made-up of now little fiefdoms of people cobbling up and living in the most sort of stupid and arcane ways, because there is no structure and the old structures have all gone, and you have a sense that either there is the desert that's coming back, or there is just religion. And I'm not a big believer in religion, so I don't know what the future is for Egypt. And it is the most advanced, most modern country in the Middle East. So it doesn't look very good.

**COLM TÓIBÍN:** Yeah, I would have thought that Out of Egypt is--I'm sorry for telling you that all your books are really political books--that you do feel that Egyptian nationalism, that it's not just that you're losing Egypt, but Egypt is losing the Acimans.

And that level of richness and diversity within that place is slowly being eroded. And certainly in Ireland, I'm not an Irish nationalist, but I do deplore partition. Because it would be so wonderful to have a million Protestants in the general body of activity within the island of Ireland, in Parliament, in every other area.

And sometimes when I go to Northern Ireland I think it would be absolutely wonderful if these people, if these people, and including Ian Paisley, were to stand up in our Parliament and speak, and that that tradition, the Presbyterian tradition, which was so important in Ireland in the nineteenth century and gave so much to the United States, including the James family, in the early nineteenth century, that that tradition was lost to the Republic of Ireland after partition. And that so many Protestants and Presbyterians left our little state after 1922, just were frightened out of the place. And what we've had now is, in the last two or three years, something like a hundred, or a hundred and fifty thousand Poles and Latvians have arrived in Ireland, and they're adding diversity, there're loads of Nigerians, because we have full employment, now people are coming from all over the world to work in Ireland, and that's adding enormously to the sort of flavor of life in the city of Dublin. And you realize sometimes, only when you've been in London, you come back into Dublin, everyone's white, everyone's Catholic, everyone had the same upbringing, and that that actually just isn't a good idea for any society. And you do feel that about Egypt, that putting all you people out is a terrible mistake not only for you, but for Egypt.

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** That's true, up to a certain point I think it was okay with me. **(laughter)** I mean seriously--

**COLM TÓIBÍN:** What do you mean?

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** I mean, I'm not sorry I left, or was kicked out. It turned out for the better. I really think so. Unless you want to turn back the clock to the 1940s, which is even before I was born, where things were quite good for everyone in Egypt, not just for the Europeans. But that's a political statement, and I don't...

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** A question for André. André, do we now need to think of you as a novelist--or another way of posing the question is, what's next for you? Are you, have you left the exile business? **(laughter)**

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** A very good friend of mine, who's no longer with us, once warned me and said, you know, you've got to stop with this exile, memory, Proust thing. It really is enough. Do something else, I don't care what you do, but don't do that--he raised his finger at me--he said, enough with this exile. We get it. And I--it took me many years to listen to him, but he was right and I knew he was right, it just took me forever. But I think I'm freed of it, it just has morphed and become something else. I want to be done with it.

**COLM TÓIBÍN:** Is it possible that you can't write a New York novel because you haven't lost New York? **(laughter)**

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** Well, I can write a novel that's set in the 1970s, and then that's lost, that particular New York is gone. And therefore we can do that. **(laughter)**

Okay.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Both André and Colm will sign books now, and before doing that I would like to thank them very much.