Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/vcrt20

"I'm Here": Isolation and Presence in the Short Stories of Tobias Wolff

Tristan Ireson-Howells

To cite this article: Tristan Ireson-Howells (2022): "I'm Here": Isolation and Presence in the Short Stories of Tobias Wolff, Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction, DOI: 10.1080/00111619.2022.2063708

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/00111619.2022.2063708

Published online: 15 Apr 2022.

CRITIQUE: STUDIES IN CONTEMPORARY FICTION
https://doi.org/10.1080/00111619.2022.2063708

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

"I'm Here": Isolation and Presence in the Short Stories of Tobias Wolff

Tristan Ireson-Howells

American Studies, Canterbury Christ Church University, UK

ABSTRACT

This article argues that Tobias Wolff critiques a doctrine of individualism, formed particularly in America during the Eighties, which has informed a central dynamic in his writing. Wolff depicts characters who must struggle to move away from solipsistic ideologies by seeing beyond habitual cycles of stagnated and destructive behavior. In many of his stories, characters are caught between a guarded sense of distance, versus an imperative to connect with those around them. I argue that the perceived vulnerability of forming relationships and the complex duties of moral decision-making create a tension that forms the basis of much of Wolff's storytelling. I argue that Wolff shows how a focus on the present rather than on fleeting impulses or a fixation with the past can elucidate his protagonists' lives. Three of Wolff's stories close with the same two words: "I'm here." I explore why this short sentence has such resonance in his work by drawing connections between these stories which span thirty years. In each case, the speaker is doing far more than consoling a person in distress. These precise words depict characters tentatively seeking to redefine themselves in climactic moments of self-growth.

Introduction

Tobias Wolff's short stories have gained him widespread acclaim with his works appearing often in *The New Yorker* and *Esquire* among other publications. Yet, despite his popular readership, his stories are rarely for the fainthearted. Wolff has a tendency to produce narratives that are so bleak, and then so joltingly sudden in their revelations, or in their lack of closure, that he threatens to test his readers' enjoyment and perseverance beyond the point of discomfort. What perhaps keeps the reader going is a compelling thread in his stories with a moral center as he explores the experiences of characters who are vulnerable, adrift and, in many cases, facing difficult ethical quandaries.

Additionally, there is a significant religious dimension to Wolff's works because of the author's Catholic roots, evident in the modified parables which feature prominently in his stories. Characters must make choices as they struggle with self-doubt as well as questioning the certainty of Christian faith to provide guidance. Wolff identifies with these conflicting feelings himself. In an interview with Lyons and Oliver he talks about his story 'The Missing Person' from his collection *Back in the World* (1985), where a church has rotting foundations and relies on fraudulent charity to keep it going. Wolff explains: "I am a Catholic, but that's the way I see the institutional church – I think it's become the cross the believers have to bear" (10). At other times Wolff draws attention to the function of the parable form itself with its simplified didactic purpose in contrast to narratives in which moral actions are rarely simple and the way to live virtuously is shown to be too complicated to follow a single prescribed order.[1]

CONTACT Tristan Ireson-Howells tristanireson@icloud.com American Studies, Canterbury Christ Church University, UK
Twitter @HowellsIreson

The protagonists in Wolff's stories are often bereft as they attempt to find routes beyond points of spatial and emotional dislocation. A common theme in Wolff's work, honed in stories from *Back in the World*, portray a particularly American sensibility of the early Eighties in which self-interest is prioritized at the expense of charity, compassion or community. His stories are shaped by the ascendancy of laissez-faire capitalism advocating the interests of the individual. In many cases Wolff depicts characters who are either driven or outcast by self-serving principles shaped by the ideals of radical individualism, the neoliberalism of the Reagan era, and post-Fordist ideologies. With this underpinning doctrine, which is seen to alienate the emotionally fragile individual, Wolff's writing explores how his characters choose to confront their own loneliness with a dilemma defined by a dichotomy between engagement or withdrawal. This article will explore how Wolff's protagonists are forced to choose whether to close-off further from relationships to protect themselves, or to expose their vulnerability and to provide support to those around them in greater need. My close readings, which develop a significant link between three of his stories in particular, 'The Missing Person,' 'The Night in Question,' and 'Down to Bone,' show how the act of being present can allow his characters the possibility of seeing the world and themselves anew.

Wolff's American Landscapes

Wolff finds compelling material in often overlooked scenes of daily struggles and suburban settings. His characters inhabit unremarkable locales like the forlorn and lost figures in an Hopper painting. Hopper provides a useful starting point in an appraisal of Wolff's central themes. In praise of the artist Charles Burchfield, Hopper identified with a distinct depiction of mid-century America where figures seem trapped in lonely places with a pervasive mood of quiet desperation. Hopper writes:

> The look of an asphalt road as it lies in the broiling sun at noon, cars and locomotives lying in God-forsaken railway yards, the steaming summer rain that can fill us with such hopeless boredom. The bland concrete wall and steel construction of modern industry, mid-summer streets with acid greens of close cut lawns, the dusty Fords and gilded movies - all the sweltering, tawdry life of the American small town, and behind it all, the sad desolation of our suburban landscape. (Hopper 6-7)

David Peters Corbett characterizes the "[s]ullen potency" (576) of Hopper's artworks and Wolff's settings could be colored by the same brushstrokes evoking a similar tone beyond the chimera of the American Dream.[2] In Wolff's story 'The Poor Are Always with Us' from *Back in the World*, taken from *The Stories of Tobias Wolff* (1988), Wolff captures much of the mood that Burchfield or, Hopper himself were able to arouse on canvas. At the close of the story, a morally flawed protagonist named Russell has failed to show compassion when he claims the winnings from a wager he can see his opponent cannot afford to lose. Russell wins a bet and takes the other man's car despite several opportunities to show pity. In the closing scene Russell watches the beaten man trudge away as he is left looking across the desert of the Los Angeles cityscape: "The low sun burned in the windows of a motel down the street. Above the motel rooftop, against the blue-sky, hung a faint white haze like the haze of chalk dust on the blue suit Russell's father wore to school. Blurred shapes of cars flashed back and forth. Russell felt a little lost" (223). From the pastel hues forming the backdrop of "sad desolation" Wolff's characters demonstrate something truly revealing of their inner selves through their lack of connection or, unlike Russell, through the fostering of tentative and brittle relationships.

The Failure of Relationships

In 'Sister' from *Back in the World*, Wolff presents a rather innocuous scene. The central character, Marty, goes to the park where she chats with a couple of men who are working-out. The interaction feels strained as Marty senses a world of male bonding she will never be able to enter. As Martin Scofield comments, the story portrays "the predicament of a young woman defined and trapped by a man's world, her only freedom a certain self-awareness" (100). When a frisbee is thrown near them,

Marty runs into the street to retrieve it and is almost hit by a passing car. Shaken and embarrassed, Marty returns to her apartment and is overcome by a feeling of absence. The story concludes on her own abrupt insight that her life will never be shared:

> there was nobody to talk to about it, to see how afraid she was and tell her not to worry, that it was over now. That everything was going to be all right. And Marty understood that there was never going to be anyone to tell her these things she had no idea why this should be so; it was just something she knew (230).

In the two stories discussed Wolff offers little hope for his protagonists. Yet elsewhere, characters who initially appear lost find a semblance of consolation in simple acts of connection. As Farrell O'Gorman argues: "In this committed presence to others, we glimpse the understated grace available to characters in the most hopeful of [Wolff's] early stories" (75). Yet, this interpretation fails to do justice to the complexity of Wolff's writing where an attachment to others is loaded with a plethora of doubts and frustration. Marty wishes for companionship and realizes she will never find it, but many of Wolff's stories deal with emotional isolation that is only intensified by personal contact. Wolff explores the interdependence of relationships and the unavailability of these alone to offer solace.

Protagonists are presented with choices about whether they should engage with those around them or defend their own vulnerabilities and retreat ever further into themselves and away from societal pressure. In 'Migraine' from *The Night in Question* (1996), the central character, Joyce, imagines a life without the burden of reciprocal bonds. Joyce leaves work early as she has a migraine. Resting on the sofa, she is left to feel that people's daily requirements sap her strength "with their needs and their demands and their feelings, their almighty anxieties" (125–6). By contrast, without other people Joyce contemplates how she could regain part of herself previously lost: "she could begin to read again, to think, to see things as they were. Alone, she could be as cold and hard as the truth demanded [. . .] No pretense of intimacy. No lies" (126). Her theory equates solitude with lucidity. Relationships require an exposure to others' neuroses, whereas being alone allows a clarity of thought. With Joyce's self-reliant impulse giving way to an act of tender contact: her partner, who is in the process of moving out, massages her temples at the close of the story, a conclusion about Wolff's attraction to the needs of others has led some critics to a natural supposition. O'Gorman suggests that in Wolff's early stories characters learn to see beyond their solipsism. The lessons of Wolff's prose "makes us search not more deeply within ourselves, but rather beyond ourselves – for the saving grace that might be found in those around us now" (O'Gorman 86). However, many of Wolff's depictions of romantic relationships show individuals to be all the more isolated by codependency.

In 'Face to Face' from *In the Garden of North American Martyrs* (1981), collected in *The Stories of Tobias Wolff*, Virginia begins a relationship with an emotionally crippled man named Robert. Their romance ends on a weekend trip to Vancouver when Robert drinks too much, obsesses over his ex-wife, and forces himself on Virginia. Traveling back by car they see a beautiful lake, Robert feels his loneliness more keenly; he chooses to confide:

> 'When I used to see things like that [. . .] I used to wish I had someone to see it with me.' He looked at Virginia and laughed. She saw that he was in some pain. She touched his hand. 'I know what you mean. It's not easy, sometimes, being alone.' (71)

The story emphasizes its protagonists lack of connection where a relationship formed on a desire to escape loneliness has been strained to breaking point.

Elsewhere, Wolff explores how more established relationships can be built on fragile foundations. In 'Desert Breakdown, 1968' from *Back in the World* a couple are left stranded while driving to Los Angeles. Mark and Krystal are forced to stop at a remote gas station and Mark decides to walk to the nearest town for help. As he walks Mark resolves to permanently leave his pregnant wife and their child. He attempts to justify to himself his abandonment of his family: "They did not need each other. There was no particular reason for them to be together [. . .] They were dragging each other down like

two people who couldn't swim" (272). Mark comes to believe that companionship serve only to strip him of a destiny of a glorious future: "when you got married you had to give up one thing after another [. . .] You had to give up your life – the special one you were meant to have" (272).

Characters such as Mark and Russell are left despondent by their egotistical heartlessness. In depicting these characters' struggles Wolff critiques American principles of individualism and dreams of self-realization. Mark's quest for self-sufficiency, to "do it alone" (263) as he desires, leads him on a nightmarish journey he accepts from a group of unhinged dropouts portentously traveling in a hearse. Wolff's works would continue beyond the Eighties to portray characters' narcissistic fantasies and a culture with a dominant undercurrent of objectivism. It is noteworthy that Ann Rand, whose philosophy reflected and exemplified these values, appears in Wolff's *Old School* (2003).

The strong moral center at the heart of Wolff's work complicates how characters respond to a cultural malaise of pervasive self-interest and absent spiritualism. There is a phrase that is emblematic of Wolff's exploration of individual responsibility and his focus on acts of connection and self-reflection. Three of Wolff's most moving stories close with the same two words. I will consider the similarities in these stories written almost exactly ten years apart in 1986, 1996, and 2008. Each story ends with the same words spoken by the stories' protagonists: "I'm here." These stories do not portray romantic relationships, 'The Missing Person' depicts a priest and a stranger in a hotel room enduring miserable vacations in Las Vegas, 'The Night in Question' portrays a brother recounting a story to his sister, and 'Down to Bone' focuses on a son spending time with his dying mother. I explore the relationships between the three sets of characters: in each case between caregiver and recipient, and how this bond functions beyond acts of simple kindness.

Fear and Searching in Las Vegas

In 'The Missing Person' Father Leo is a priest who is sleepwalking through his calling. Frustrated by life amongst the nuns in the convent in which he has somehow found himself, Father Leo strikes up an unlikely friendship with the convent's fundraising raconteur conman, Jerry. Having orchestrated several lucrative donations by peddling sob-stories to rich benefactors through a series of fabrications, in which Father Leo is complicit in the fraud, the pair decide to take a celebratory holiday to Las Vegas with their dishonest gains. As soon as they arrive, Jerry disappears for several days on a gambling spree in which he loses the money they had earned and pledged to the church. Father Leo is left alone at the hotel. Unsure what to do, he searches for Jerry by traipsing from one casino to another then waiting hopefully in the hotel lobby. On one of these journeys Father Leo befriends a woman on holiday by herself named Sandra who he has met earlier at a bar. Their relationship becomes awkward when they meet again at the hotel pool and Father Leo softly refuses to put suntan lotion on Sandra's back. She does not believe his excuse that he is a priest and feels humiliated by being turned-down. When Sandra later calls his hotel room in the middle of the night to say she is afraid that someone is trying to break into her room, Father Leo agrees to keep her company and then benevolently watches over her while she tries to sleep. As they talk, Father Leo is able to appreciate Sandra's loneliness further. As Sandra stirs in bed, he gently comforts her with the final words of the story: "I'm here" (205).

It initially seems the missing person of the story's title is Jerry who vanishes on the friends' first night of what is supposed to be their triumphant vacation. However, as more details of Father Leo's life are revealed, a second interpretation of the story's title becomes far more apt. Father Leo is in fact a missing person because he has failed to have experiences or forge meaningful connections with those around him. Yet, through the ordeal in Las Vegas, Father Leo begins to reevaluate his choices and by the end, appreciate things that his religious learning has failed to show him. When they first meet, Jerry spends time with Father Leo telling colorful stories from his life before he worked at the convent. Jerry, or so he says, has been, among many other things, a professional fighter and a private detective. According to his tales he has "been everywhere and seen everything" (186). In a bar together, sharing a few drinks, Jerry offers to disclose his real name thereby deepening their bond of trust. As Jerry looks toward him Father Leo feels the expectation to take his turn in the conversation. Suddenly aware of his

shortcomings he is unable to fulfill his side of the exchange. Father Leo realizes "[h]e should open up and talk about himself for a change. But there was nothing to tell. He had no stories. Not one" (189). Father Leo feels such a need to share a story that is comparable to the ones Jerry has told that he fabricates an incident from his past in which he rescues a woman being attacked by a mugger; Father Leo takes the story one step further and claims that, in a fit of rage, he goes on to kill the assailant.

Although Father Leo decided on his vocation with romantic ideas of adventure and a commitment to "a life full of risk among people who needed him" (178), the reality of his career could not have been further from his noble aspirations. Father Leo has seen and experienced very little; he is first assigned to a parish in Seattle where his duties are limited to menial work like "managing rummage sales" and organizing "bingo" nights (178). When the pastor dies, Father Leo is consigned to teaching a parish elementary school, but he is fired from the job for failing to keep up with the curriculum. He is unable to adapt or deviate from a path he has established for himself. Father Leo is next sent to a convent named The Star of the Sea. Here the nuns do not take him seriously and gently tease him. Father Leo's vocation has been marked by its lack of risk, absence of belonging, and the complete redundancy of his usefulness. He is criticized by Mother Vincent at The Star of the Sea for being fixated on his own problems. Father Leo is "missing" due to his dislocation from others.

The search Father Leo undertakes through the gaudy streets of Las Vegas to find his friend is revealed to be an act of self-seeking. In the final scene in Sandra's hotel room the pair build a tender relationship recognizing something in common. At first, Father Leo finds her interest in him and her questions annoying, but he understands that Sandra is simply "lonely" (197) when they first talk by the hotel pool. She has come to Las Vegas for the same reason as most holidaymakers to the gambling city: to find an escapist sanctuary from her home life. She confides that she has not enjoyed her solitary vacation. When Father Leo sits by Sandra's bed to comfort her she asks him: "Do you think you could love me? If the circumstances were changed?" (204). Father Leo kindly answers that he could and then, when pressed further, he lists some of the qualities in Sandra that he says he could love. The final line of the story feels like Father Leo coming through the fog of his unremarkable existence toward a fresh perspective. Letting Sandra know that he is there and not about to leave is of course an act of benevolence as she feels bereft, but it is just as much a self-acknowledgement. It is significant that Father Leo's unlikely revelation does not involve divine insight, but is facilitated by an obligation to care: something he has not been doing in his duties thus far. Indeed, the Las Vegas hotel could not be further from a convent or his religious order. It is the only instance in the story where he is truly needed by someone and his presence matters.

Catholicism and Childhood

The same closing two words are used in 'The Night in Question,' the title story of the collection. Wolff occasionally makes use of a literary device in which one story is told within another, as first seen in 'Our Story Begins.' In these pieces this functions to juxtapose two narratives as aspects of each story are reflected in one another and themes are revealed by a series of connections. This nested narrative technique also brings to the forefront the act of storytelling and the fissures in a story's construction and by its telling. Just as with 'The Missing Person,' there is also a religious aspect to 'The Night in Question.' At the beginning of the story Frank recounts a sermon he has earlier heard to his sister, Frances, "the way he used to act out movie scenes for her when they were young" (174). Frank has had various difficulties since returning from his time in the military and his sister has always stepped in to help him. With very little exposition, the reader gets a sense of a history of Frank's demands on Frances and her unflinching willingness to respond to each and every emergency he has. There are references to Frank's time spent in rehabilitation clinics, an occasion when he almost costs Frances her job, and a traffic accident in which he nearly dies. In fact, Frances has only come to see Frank "to hold his hand over a disappointment in love" (174). However, Frank seems to be unconcerned with this particular failure and is intent on detailing, in full, the sermon he has heard concerning a father who is in charge of operating a train bridge. In

Frank's story, a father named Mike is asked to cover a shift and is obliged to take his son, Benny, to work with him where he is responsible for lowering and raising a bridge. Benny is a bright and curious boy with a love of mechanics. When Benny disappears below the control room and possibly into the bridge's dangerous giant mechanism, which the operators refer to as "the mill," Mike must make the agonizing decision between saving his own child or saving the lives of the passengers on an oncoming commuter train. Wolff retells the ethical thought dilemma of the utilitarian trolley problem where the lives of many are weighed against that of one as an onlooker is given sudden agency and is forced to decide on one terrible action. Frances becomes upset that Frank has been so easily conned into believing the moralizing parable he has been able to regurgitate with such gusto. At one point he pauses for dramatic effect and Frances understands even "this little moment of reflection was just another part of the sermon" (179).

Frances is reluctant to stay longer than ten minutes; she knows that as soon as Frank begins to recount what he has heard, and the language he uses does not sound like his own, "[something terrible was going to happen in the story, something Frances would regret having heard [. . .] But she didn't stop him. Frank was her little brother, and she would deny him nothing" (176). Frances' devotion to her brother continually causes her pain, but she never ceases to placate him. Whereas their domineering father had "said no to his son in everything, [. . .] Frances would say no to him in nothing. Frank was aware of her reluctance and learned to exploit it" (177). Before he has finished, Frances complains: "I have to tell you that's a crummy story. What're we supposed to get from a story like that – we should kill our own kid to save some strangers? [. . .] I should do this because the so-called Father of All did it? Is that the point?" (182). Here Wolff's narrative takes on an added dimension, as Frank's story unfolds, it echoes aspects of the sibling's childhood abuse at the hands of their own father, Frank Senior. Details of Wolff's own childhood, and the vitriolic behavior of his stepfather, are apparent here as well, as told in his memoir *This Boy's Life* (1989). During Frank's recounting of the sermon there are a number of flashbacks. Frances remembers how she would protect her younger brother from their father who takes out his violent temper on Frank who enrages him further by refusing to acquiesce to his bullying outbursts: "Frank Senior has decided that his son needed to be broken, and Frank would not break. He went after everything his father said no to, with Frances egging him on and mothering him when he got caught" (177). Frank Senior takes to dangling a pocket watch in front of the young Frank and admonishing him each time he tries to grab it. Frank will not learn the lesson, much to Frances' frustration, and this only intensifies his father's fury. Two images align from the inner and outer diegesis of the narrative. Just as Frank reaches for the pocket watch, in his story, Benny is fascinated by the giant clocklike mechanism of the bridge and his curiosity takes him down below into its dangerous workings.

Hiding upstairs as their father works himself into a rage, huddling together, Frances remembers how she would reassure Frank when they were children. She remembers Frank whispering her name to which she responds: *"It's okay, Franky. I'm here*" (184). This is the final line and image of the story. On an initial reading it would be reasonable to interpret both Frances' and Father Leo's responses as two acts of consolation: characters caring for a person in need and comforting them selflessly. Yet, Wolff's stories do something other than to posit these tender moments as simply signifying the healing potential of altruistic care for both recipient and caregiver. While Frances certainly feels greatly for her brother and desires to protect him, the story develops a more troubling aspect as a closer reading reveals that she exhibits behaviors of being addicted to offering herself to Frank and, in so doing, has fueled their rather toxic co-dependence. Frances' husband calls attention to her actions constituting "complicity" (177) in a nightmarish series of events. The implication is as much as she is providing actual support, she is also locked into a perpetual cycle of need: both his and her own. She cannot move on from her imagined responsibility; she craves the drama and desires to be continually needed by her younger brother. It is a twisted sense that appears rooted in their childhoods. One night, Frank Senior has a belt in his hand and is pursuing young Frank to whip him. Frances jumps on her father's back to protect her brother and "[w]hen it was over Frances was flat on the floor with a split lip and a ringing

sound in her ears, laughing like a madwoman. Frank was crying" (177). It is a shocking scene of child abuse made all the more disturbing by France's response: crumpled and bleeding in the corner yet laughing manically through her exhilarated rage.

France's husband does not understand her continued devotion to Frank despite the ordeals he has caused them. However, Frances will defend her brother to the end. Frances has shared the trauma of their abuse and knows that her husband "did not understand what it meant to be helpless and alone" (177–8). She feels: "No one should be alone in this world. Everyone should have someone who kept the faith, no matter what, all the way" (178). The choice of the word "faith" is significant here in deviating from a religious interpretation to a humanist one. Yet, as with 'Face to Face' relationships are rarely depicted as healing endeavors in Wolff's writing. The bond Frances clings to with her brother is desperate and, one senses, damaging to them both. Because she once protected him, she cannot relinquish this nurturing role she has always envisioned for herself, hence the harm to her marriage, work and ultimately to each other. In remembering her precise words, Frances is trapped in the "here" not of their present lives, but of her own past and the trauma they both experienced. Earlier Frank talks about the presence of God in our lives, but the speech, given the context of the rest of the story, seems to refer as much to France's relationship with her father:

> He knows what we all know, even when we try to forget it: we are never alone, ever. We are in our Father's presence in the light of day and in the dark of night, even in the darkness where we run from Him, hiding our faces like fearful children. He will not leave us. No. He will never leave us alone. Though we lock every window and bar every door, still He will enter (181).

The "here" that Frances speaks of, is actually decades ago and the memory of her father's cruelty: he "will never leave [her] alone" (181). Frances still fundamentally sees herself as the protective sister of her formative years where she adopted a maternal role after their mother's early death. Frances remains locked within her dysfunctional and abusive childhood, still addicted to the psychological thrill of her ferocious rage. Thinking back, "[s]he could still taste that smoke and hear her father's steps on the stairs, Frank panting beside her, moving closer, his voice whispering her name and her own voice answering as fear gave way to ferocity and unaccountable joy" (184). Once again, the two stories share images with the father's cigar smoke mirroring the plumes of dark smoke from the oncoming train as shown on the 1997 Vintage edition of the collection's front cover. The "here" Frances occupies is the past and, with those final words, she remains forever metaphorically imprisoned in the cupboard with her brother with the abnormal excitement of purpose and the rush of impending violence.

Matters of Life and Death

It is telling that in a story from his 2008 collection, *Our Story Begins*, Wolff returns to the specific words he has previously used. In 'Down to Bone' a grown son visits his dying mother so he can care for her in the last days of her life and begin to finalize funeral arrangements. The son has come in the hope of healing the bonds and distance that he feels have developed over time between them. However, it seems that his reconciliatory intent will be in vain as he spends "the long hours of useless witness to his mother's dying – not being able to reach her, not knowing what to do or say" (330). He feels that the actuality of the event has failed to meet the earnestness of his wishes: "None of this was as he hoped [. . .] abolishing the wariness that had somehow grown up between them" (330). While fulfilling the role of dutiful son, he is at a loss of how to reignite the connection he had first sought as he looks through family photographs.

The son finds himself making excuses to leave his invalid mother. Glad to be away from her for some much-needed respite, in the mid-section of the story, the protagonist strikes up a flirtatious conversation with an Austrian woman who runs a memorial chapel. As they share a couple of beers after a long hot day, he imagines a sexual encounter between them before, feeling slightly ridiculous, he makes a hurried exit. As with most of Wolff's stories, and in the case of the three examples discussed here, there is a layered morality lesson at the heart of the narrative. When the protagonist

is expected to be tending to his dying mother, he is in fact playing out an alternative version of himself: one that comes to horrify him. The son has rented a red sports car for his time in Los Angeles. The excessively flashy car and his sexual fantasy in the memorial chapel suddenly fill him with self-disgust: "He had [. . .] a picture of himself enacting the most exhausted and demeaning of clichés. It offended him. It chilled him" (335). As soon as he has this moment of self-awareness in the chapel, he makes his excuses to the woman who had been discussing funeral arrangements and makes a speedy exit.

Even during the exchange, he becomes aware of the absurdity of the situation and his feelings of: "abandoning himself to Eros to obliterate his fear of death" (335). Wolff playfully points to a Freudian interpretation which the man himself recognizes through the driving id of "his mortuary lust" (335). The title of the story plays with a similar double meaning, on one hand the literal frailty of the mother's hand to his touch, on the other, traveling south and the impulsive sexual urges of the protagonist. For all his genuine sadness, the son is reluctant to stay with his mother as he feels ill at ease with her fragility and the attention of the palliative carers who administer to her needs. Sitting beside her, he is not solely flitting through memories of times they have shared or from his childhood, but "itching to leave" (328). Later, when she does eventually die, he is not with her, but "down the street eating a plate of fried plantains" (335), perhaps incongruously chosen as an activity one may enjoy on a vacation. Yet there is a redeeming aspect to the story in the mother and son's final meaningful interaction.

The ending of the story jumps back several hours to their most poignant exchange of their last few days together. The son returns to the apartment where the attendants tell him that his mother is distressed and calling out for her father. In an attempt to comfort her, the son adopts the role of her father answering her:

> "Daddy?"
> "It's all right. I'm here."
> "Where were you?"
> "At work."
> The room was dim. The two women moved like shadows behind him. He heard the door click shut.
> "I was alone"
> "I know. It's all right now." [. . .]
> "Daddy," she whispered. "You're here." (336)

The son knows that his mother had an unhappy relationship with her father; in fact, her father had been a spiteful and violent man who had forced her to leave school and turned her essentially into "a house slave" (328) after her own mother's death. The son remembers how his mother attended her father's funeral just to make sure he had truly gone. Standing at the service "she had worn an expression of rare, adamant coldness, almost of triumph" (328–9). However, in her confusion at the end of her life she regresses, reaching out for some distant childhood security, wanting only her father's consoling voice to calm her and sooth her pain.

The final image of the story mirrors a scene from the first few pages. Initially the son, feeling restless, as all he can do is wait, pores over family albums and sees an image of his mother as a little girl at her first communion. He is touched by this photograph seeing his mother anew. He is surprised to see her as "the very image of his own young daughter" (328). At the close of the story, his mother again becomes a child in her vulnerable state and in needing only parental care. The protagonist feels that he has not known what to do in the preceding days: watching his mother without being able to ease her suffering or even communicate with her. However, when his role is altered, he is suddenly sure of how to act: "He no longer knew how to be a son, but he knew how to be a father" (336). Instead of the "here" of clichéd middle-age crisis driving his red sports car, he is in the "here" of the present and fulfilling the cyclical transition of parental-child nurture. At this moment he is fully engaged with her support; he is attuned to her needs. By extension he is in the process of redefining himself as he has escaped the "chilling" mistake he was on route to make in his transitory infatuation with the woman in the memorial chapel.

Conclusion

All three stories engage with themes of religious faith and a questioning of an all-powerful God. In 'Down to Bone' the protagonist is partly dissuaded from attempting to seduce the Austrian woman he has just met due to shame through "a childish sense of being watched by the God he lazily believed in" (335). It seems that Christianity may not play a role in his day-to-day life, but the concept of an all-seeing deity continues to shape his moral choices, even when the implausibility of such meaning is redundant. In 'The Night in Question' Frank is telling his sister a parable he has heard in church told by the rather comically named Dr. Violet, which is one letter short of 'violent.' Frances is angry, not only that her brother can be so easily influenced by the pastor's rhetoric and the story's allusions to God's brutal sacrifice of his own son, but that her importance to her brother has seemingly been relegated in favor of his newfound religious zeal. Frances feels that no tormentor is beyond her retribution even God himself: "From the time she was a scabby-kneed girl she'd taken on her own father, and if push came to shove she'd take on the Father of All, that incomprehensible bully" (183–4). In her interpretation, God is simply a "bully" just like the memory of their own father. Even Father Leo, the one believer we would expect to see, shows little sign of true faith. In one passage he reads an article about the scientific creation of the universe with no reference to the description jarring with his spiritual beliefs. In fact, the phrase "I'm here" evokes the faithless void of Wolff's artistic imagination: it is the lonely cry of man or woman in an increasingly secular world. As another Catholic writer, Don DeLillo, asks in *Mao II* (1991): "When the Old *God* leaves the world, what *happens to all the unexpended faith*?" (7). In Wolff's work, God is often a shadowy presence, yet his characters still crave meaning and purpose once available through pious devotion. Wolff's stories ask not only how moral choices are made, but how, without the anchor of unquestioning faith, can right and wrong be separated in choosing to live with virtue.

In each story I have explored how the utterance of "I'm here" initially seems to be an act of empathy: a consolation to a vulnerable person in distress. However, the intent behind the words is far more multifaceted than simply offering comfort. The closing lines, "I'm here," diverts these stories into moments of insight, revealing something of a character's past for Frances, the speaker's potential for Father Leo, or turns the speaker into someone else in 'Down to Bone.' Rather than a "committed presence to others," as O'Gorman suggests, these statements strike a note of affirming selfhood, but without an egotistical dimension. In each story the words are unheard or misconstrued by the recipient of support. The caregivers' reassurance acts as verbal validation of physical presence for the speaker alone. Although the mother in 'Down to Bone' is seemingly comforted by her son's words, she is assigning them to her own father, it is the man's redefinition of himself which is of greater importance. In 'The Night in Question' Frances is not comforting her brother in the present, in fact he does not seem to need her support, instead she is remembering an event long ago. It is doubtful, and there is no textual suggestion, that the sleeping woman hears Father Leo's reassurance. Father Leo understands that he must stand forward to engage with the world before him rather than hiding in the obscurity of his modest and comfortable life in the convent.

Wolff, whilst acknowledging that his stories are open to multiple interpretations, has suggested that he feels Father Leo's epiphany is essentially one shaped by optimism. In discussion with; Lyons and Oliver he says: "I think that [Father Leo] has discovered by the end that his vocation is where he is at any given moment and that he has to bring himself completely to that moment. When he says "I'm here," people tend to think of that as a very sad ending. But I always thought of it as a hopeful ending" (10). Wolff suggests that Father Leo's feeling of connection is facilitated by a new outlook with a commitment to live in the present. A similarly optimistic reading of 'The Night in Question' would likewise imagine that Frances recognizes how defined she has become by her past as the first stage of healing. Frances' remembrance of the words: "I'm here" suggests that she remains in that period of traumatic childhood and abuse, rather than the "here" of her present life. Similarly, the son in 'Down to Bone' is granted a moment of connection with his mother, shifting his role. "I'm here" is meant not just as a simple statement of comfort, but as an affirmation of selfhood. However, this

selfhood is not shaped by narcissism, the speakers are less divested in the egotistical impulse commonly portrayed in Wolff's early stories. These words are less motivated by the tenets of individualism, but articulate a declaration of presence and a realization of mindful engagement with the immediacy of one's actions and surroundings to bring at least the possibility of change.

Notes

1. Wolff's use of the parable form is exemplified in stories such as "The Rich Brother" from *Back in the World* and "The Chain" from *Bullet in the Brain*.
2. Several art critics have discussed Hopper's use of the railroad as a symbol of American progress in the early 20th century but, equally importantly, attributing its connotations to symbolism of melancholy, loneliness and alienation. Gail Levin's chapter "Hopper's Railroad Imagery," in Susan Danly's and Leo Marx's *The Railroad in American Art: Representations of Technological Change* (1988) explores this theme in detail. I later discuss how Wolff uses the deadly momentum of the train as a narrative device and symbolic reference in the story 'The Night in Question'.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributor

Tristan Ireson-Howells received his PhD from Canterbury Christ Church University, UK. His research areas include the contemporary short story, portrayals of sport in modern literature, metafiction and visual art.

ORCID

Tristan Ireson-Howells http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0705-4306

Works cited

DeLillo, Don. *Mao II*. Viking, 1991. Print.
Hopper, Edward. "Charles Burchfield: American." *The Arts*, vol. 14, 1928, pp. 5–12.
Lyons, Bonnie, and Bill Oliver. "An Interview with Tobias Wolf." *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 31, no. 1, 1990, pp. 1–16. Spring. doi:10.2307/1208633.
O'Gorman, Farrell. "Tobias Wolff's *Back in the World*: American Dreamers, American Deserts, Saving Word." *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, vol. 48, no. 1, 2006, pp. 71–89.
Peters Corbett, David. "The Painting of Urban Life, 1880-1930." *A Companion to American Art*, edited by John Davis, et al., Wiley Blackwell, 2015, pp. 562–80.
Scofield, Martin. "Winging It: Realism and Invention in the Stories of Tobias Wolff." *Yearbook of English Studies*, vol. 31, no. 1, 2001, pp. 93–108. doi:10.1353/yes.2001.0090.
Wolff, Tobias. *This Boy's Life*. Grove P, 1989.
Wolff, Tobias. *The Night In Question*. Knopf, 1996.
Wolff, Tobias. *The Stories of Tobias Wolff*. Bloomsbury, 1997.
Wolff, Tobias. *Our Story Begins*. Bloomsbury, 2008.