

**“There is no better way to heal yourself than singing in a choir”:
Music, Trauma, and Silence in Colm Tóibín’s *Nora Webster* (2014)**

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The three key words in my subtitle conjoin in this instance to suggest a particular model of subjectivity operating at large across one of the recurring narratives of modern Irish history.

Building on a tradition of antiquarian research, music came to represent an important element of Irish cultural history during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as well as (in some accounts) a recurring component of Irish identity (Leerson 1996; White 1999). These accounts remain strong down to the present day; the myth of the “musical Irish” is alive and well in 2022. During the same period, moreover, the *idea* of music came to feature strongly (if somewhat paradoxically) in the modern Irish literary tradition (White 2008). Key figures in this regard include the writer Thomas Moore, whose beautiful songs contrasted past and present in ways that were both compelling and ironic; and the writer (and aspiring singer) James Joyce, who deployed music’s social ubiquity to produce an extraordinarily affective representation of Irish identity attempting to forge itself within a rapidly modernising world (Smyth 2021).

Among other things, Joyce’s writing revealed Irish identity to be both radically displaced and dauntingly dysfunctional. While music was moving to the centre of the Irish cultural imaginary during the nineteenth century, the island’s uneven experience of colonialism was working to produce a highly damaged national subject operating within a fatally disrupted narrative of Irish history. Events (such as the “Great Famine” of the 1840s) and various recurring social tendencies (such as the violence attendant upon the process of decolonisation) worked to traumatize the subject attempting to navigate a route

through a deeply fragmented society. The Irish subject is fatally “unhomed” in this regard (“discordant” might be better) – simultaneously “anomalous” (irregular, abnormal) and “adulterated” (debased, corrupted) in David Lloyd’s terms. (1993) The ensuing condition of trauma is as a consequence reflected in the country’s cultural profile at every level from arts support to poetic form, from a deeply compromised state religion to the social inequalities of gender.

Music and trauma are in turn linked to the concept of silence, which represents the ontological condition *from* which music is extracted, and *against* which it is obliged to resonate. Music, as Daniel Barenboim says, is in “a permanent, constant, and unavoidable relation with ... the silence that precedes it ... the note dies, [and] this is the beginning of the tragic element in music.” (2006) Silence is locked in a similarly agonistic relationship with trauma; both a condition and a product of its emergence. The discursive battlefields of Irish history are strewn with silences, of traumatized subjects struggling to give expression to their experience and their condition. It’s in this sense that, more than either of the Blooms or Stephen Dedalus, the eponymous woman-child of Joyce’s short story “Eveline” might be regarded as the emblematic figure of Irish modernity: paralysed, mute, passive.

Music, trauma, silence: individually and in their complex interrelations these concepts speak to a model of Irish history and Irish identity that was still dominant during the period (the 1960s) in which Colm Tóibín sets his eighth novel, *Nora Webster* (2014). The story concerns a forty-six-year-old widow and mother of four living in a small town in the author’s favourite setting of Co. Wexford. Nora Webster is trying to get her life back on track after the recent death of her husband Maurice. As time passes Nora’s grief transforms into a series of persistent anxieties: money; loneliness; anger. Most weightily, she worries about the needs and expectations of her children: separation from her two teenage daughters, Fiona and Aine; her son Donal’s stammer; the watchfulness of her youngest, Conor. Slowly we learn that all five surviving

members of the Webster family are damaged and struggling in some way, and it's up to Nora (at least she feels it so) to try to hold it all together.

Nora Webster speaks in some degree to what critics have referred to as a prevalent strain of “traumaculture” operating at large throughout modern Irish history. In his book *The Ends of Ireland*, Conor Carville describes a tradition which will be familiar to all students of the field, in which “Irish history and the Irish subject are seen as coterminous, in that both function erratically and unpredictably in thrall to atavism and anachronism.” (2011, 24) In this model the past exercises a hold over the present that is both unwarranted and unhealthy: “Trauma becomes the ground on which an identity is constructed: the excluded past event – as absence – is posited and becomes a fixed point.” (34) This model, Carville avers, provided the impetus for a series of high-profile texts that appeared around the turn of the millennium: memoirs such as Frank McCourt’s *Angela’s Ashes* (1996), Nuala O’Faolain’s *Are You Somebody?* (1996), Hugo Hamilton’s *The Speckled People* (2000) and Dermot Healy’s *The Bend for Home* (1996); and novels such as Seamus Deane’s *Reading in the Dark* (1996), Roddy Doyle’s *Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha* (1993), and Anne Enright’s *The Gathering* (2007).

Carville has critiqued traumaculture because it posits a normative model of identity premised “on exactly that which escapes the subject, on an absence or a gap.” (31) “The past” may only be accessed in Irish history in the mode of crisis; temporal instability emerges as the defining national characteristic – the negative effect around which a positive identity coalesces. This has not been a healthy development, moreover, because “the indiscriminate generalization of the category of survivor and the overall conflation of history or culture with trauma have the effect of obscuring crucial historical distinctions.” (28) The disabling effect of all this is that “the Irish Studies version of the subject is seen not as dispersed primarily across contradictory sexual, ethnic or class positions,

as has been the case in Cultural Studies and literary theory, but as divided principally between past and present.” (33)

I would tend to agree with Carville that this model has been installed at the heart of modern Irish Studies, animating many of the cultural and critical discourses with which those working in the broad field will be familiar.¹ It's *not* a model that we tend to find in Tóibín's fiction, however. The trauma assailing the Webster family, for example, has not been generated by “the secrets and violence of childhood and the history of the nation as a whole.” (Carville 2011, 25) Maurice was not a monster; Ireland is not the moral / cultural disaster that we find in the trauma narratives of McCourt, O'Faolain, Enright, *et al.* Such as it is, trauma occurs in this instance as the result of an ordinary everyday event (untimely death) that has descended randomly upon an ordinary, unremarkable family. Maurice Webster's death – so indiscriminate yet so devastating – has altered profoundly and permanently the path upon which the family was launched. Each family member is in their own manner and degree “traumatized”; but this trauma is the product of a perennial human mystery rather than a racial inheritance. At no point is either death or trauma elevated to the realm of symbol, or cast in the role of national allegory. And such a scenario is in keeping with the tangential relationship that Tóibín has maintained throughout his career with Irish history and Irish identity. His work by and large operates at a distance from the pattern of nationalized trauma that Carville identifies as a dominant strain within modern Irish literature. The power of his writing, rather, lies in its delineation of the ordinary tragedies assailing ordinary people (much of the time, ordinary *Irish* people) as they attempt to live their lives in difficult circumstances. Ireland impinges more as a context that a

¹ All Carville's examples predate the financial crash of 2008. It seems clear that Irish literature has moved into a new dispensation since then, one in which both the idea of trauma *and* its literary treatment (as represented, for example, in Eimear McBride's *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing*), have significantly evolved.

destiny in this regard, the incidental backdrop against which these characters attempt to perform an identity and follow a narrative.

The one area wherein *Nora Webster* seems to resonate to some degree with the concept of traumaculture is their mutual deference to the notion of *absence* – an act or experience or emotion that somehow evades representation; as, in fact, a form of silence. Besides alerting us once again to the inalienable presence of silence within musical discourse, this is also where (in respect of that literary tradition mentioned at the outset) the relationship between music and silence comes into its own as theme, as heavily evocative symbol, as formal influence – ultimately, as a crucial factor bearing upon the emergence of an idea of modernity over the past three centuries.

It was during the eighteenth century that music's apparent transcendent condition began to be incorporated within a range of aesthetic and philosophical systems. (Bowie 2007) Music is initially invoked as the solution to certain problems in the work of thinkers such as Rousseau and Kant. From there it goes on (for Schopenhauer and Hegel) to operate as the Romantic art form *par excellence*, underpinning a wide array of cultural impulses and attitudes. It was noted, for example, that music can invoke strong responses in the listening subject, responses which evade articulation in other media, particularly the medium of language. This was the context within which the English art critic Walter Pater could claim that “[all] art constantly aspires towards the condition of music” (1910, 35); or the expatriate Irish writer Oscar Wilde could opine that “[music] is the perfect type of art.” (1923, 163) Music achieves this status through the manipulation of sounds that are both contingent and contextual, organized into styles, traditions, genres, and so on. But it achieves it also through a highly affective relationship with its own absence – with silence, in fact.

We find this potent inter-animation of trauma, music and silence at work throughout *Nora Webster*. As mentioned above, each member of the family is

traumatized to some extent by the death of Maurice, and each is struggling to adjust to the absence of a significant male figure from their lives – partner, father, *paterfamilias*. This in a time and place, after all, in which masculine hegemony is both legally encoded and psychologically entrenched. But this is also the context within which Nora discovers both the potentially healing powers of music, *and* of its phenomenological *other*: silence.

This leads us to the final critical context bearing upon Tóibín's novel: the relatively recent emergence of music therapy as a fully-fledged, highly effective treatment within the field of human pathology. The conviction that music was in some way or other "good" for you was already long established before it became axiomatic during the Romantic era. A certain flightiness (consequent upon this legacy) trailed the prospect of music-as-cure into the present; but relatively recent developments in various scientific fields (in particular, neuroscience) have concretized the view that music therapy (as well as other arts-based approaches) represents a valid form of treatment for various conditions, including grief. "Music immerses us in a range of feelings that guides self-discovery along the path to healing," writes Suzanne B. Hanser; "It also anchors us, as we grasp the meaning of music in our lives and create new ways of expressing ourselves." (2016, 1) This is a pretty good description of Nora Webster's experience. Writing in the 2010s, Tóibín's achievement was to bring an acceptance of music's healing power to bear on a context (Ireland in the 1960s and '70s) in which that power was only partially recognized, and in which prospects such as "grief" and "trauma" were processed very differently. Music is introduced as a theme early in the novel. In conversation with a condoling neighbor, Nora remembers that she "had heard her singing once at a concert, she remembered her reedy soprano – it was 'Home, Sweet Home' or 'Oft in the Stilly Night', one of those songs."² The significance of the style and

² The neighbour in question is May Lacey, mother of the central character (Eilis) from Tóibín's 2010 novel *Brooklyn*.

repertoire introduced here will emerge over the course of the text; more important at this stage are both the *idea* and the *power* of absent music. Nora invokes a memory of music that, although unheard in the moment of its invocation, persists (like the memory of Maurice) in terms of impact and affect. We are reminded that its implicit relationship with memory and emotion represents one of music's defining characteristics, and it comes as no surprise that music resonates so impactfully in a context of grief and trauma.

Nora has inherited both a good singing voice and an appreciation of music from her mother who, impecunious after the death of her own husband, would on occasion augment "her income by singing in the cathedral at weddings when people had enough money to pay her." (50) Music and money are locked together in Nora's experience, then. Even as it comes to embody a non-materialist impulse operating at large within western thought, music cannot avoid its implication in a variety of economic systems. The trade-off between art and remuneration represents the reality within which every musician or composer (professional or otherwise) is obliged to operate. Financially challenged after the death of Maurice, Nora is going to have to navigate her way across a discursive terrain in which music is both solace for the soul as well as a product to be paid for.

From its incidental presence in the opening sections, music develops in significance as the novel progresses. Art music crops up in a quiz which Nora has helped to organize in the nearby town of Blackwater; the fact that none of the contestants know (or can even remotely guess) the number of symphonies composed by figures such as Schumann or Brahms causes resentment among the quizzers. (164) Some feel that Nora and her new friend, the question-mistress Phyllis, may be using the occasion to imply an education better than the punters. This reminds us that, besides its other attributes, music is also locked into a highly sensitive discourse of social stratification; that different musical forms derive from and resonate in relation to different social

exchanges; and that music represents a form of cultural capital in which, given its social ubiquity and super-sensitive nature, we are all unavoidably implicated. One of the places where the issue of the “value” of music was most fully engaged at this very time was the county town of Wexford, a few miles to the south of Blackwater. From modest beginnings in 1951, the Wexford Festival Opera pursued its mission to source and perform “lost” repertoire to a high professional standard for non-metropolitan audiences. The festival itself has gone on to become one of the most prestigious in the world; but it has always been regarded with suspicion by those who disdain its economic model, or distrust its “alien” content. Some people, probably, simply don’t like the music. Although geographically close, in terms of quality and ambition Nora’s singing is located a long way from the Festival; as her modest musical career progresses, however, time and again she will encounter the tensions that the Festival generated in the local musical environment.

Shortly after the quiz, Nora has an intense emotional response to the sound of an acquaintance singing the popular song “Mona Lisa” before an attentive audience in the bar.³ The sound evokes a memory of the previous time she had heard that composition sung unaccompanied in public, at a wedding she had attended with Maurice in Wexford nearly twenty years earlier. She remembers how on that occasion a man named Pierce Brophy “sang it slowly, just as Tim was singing it now, and even though it was not the sort of song that Maurice liked, Nora loved it, she loved how slow and sad it was, and how clever the words were when they rhymed. More than anything else, she loved that she had Maurice beside her, she loved how they were out together at a

³ Written by Ray Evans and Jay Livingston, “Mona Lisa” first appeared in the film *Captain Carey, U.S.A* in 1950, and was a hit for Nat King Cole in that same year.

wedding wearing new clothes and that everyone in the party knew that she was married to him.” (169)

Phyllis is unimpressed with Tim’s performance, although the text doesn’t specify whether it’s the song itself or the rendition that causes her to “[raise] her eyes to the ceiling.” (One suspects both; Phyllis is a bit of a snob.) But for Nora the music transports her to another time and place. Her love for “Mona Lisa” is of a part with her love for Maurice. The song’s tempo, its tonal wistfulness and clever, aurally pleasing lyrics all resonate to some degree in terms of Nora’s recalled relationship with her husband. Relationships, it turns out, also have a tempo with which they commence and proceed and end; they also negotiate a line between precarious possession and inevitable loss; and they also require articulation so that their “reality” may be observed and acknowledged in formal rituals of regard. This particular song is associated with Nora’s once secure status as Maurice’s wife, and it’s the disorienting loss of this status that we observe her having to deal with in the first half of the novel.

Nora finds herself in the middle of a full-blown session, listening to Tim’s performance of other popular songs such as “Love Me Tender” (a 1956 hit for Elvis Presley). The performance elicits three related responses: “In the way he gave in to the melancholy of the song, the yearning, she felt that he was mocking her, looking into her face and laughing, but soon the song itself took over, he softened and strengthened his voice as the melody dictated and also let the guitar do its work, leaving gaps so that its sound could be fully heard.” (170) Her first response is to over-personalize both song and performance – to (mis-) read them as a direct message to herself and to the grief from which she is attempting to escape. But Nora is too strong and too sensible to succumb to grief-driven paranoia, and the feeling immediately gives way to an appreciation of the technical qualities of Tim’s performance. Singing has always been socially valued in Irish society, and the “good voice” represents serious cultural capital. Nora is able to recognize Tim’s quality because she is herself (as we

shall shortly discover) in possession of a “good voice.” At the same time, these songs transport her back to earlier points in her relationship with Maurice, as when she recalls returning from an evening walk with him to encounter all the local children (including their own) dancing in the lane to Presley’s hit “(Marie’s the Name) His Latest Flame.” The intensity of these interrelated responses (self-consciousness, aesthetic-technical and affective memory) force Nora to confront her new situation, and prime her to come to terms with her new, unwanted identity as widow. That new identity, we shall learn, is closely bound up with singing.

As the drink begins to flow, a local acquaintance pressures Nora into singing, and after some resistance she arranges a hastily improvised half-English, half-German version of “Brahms’s Lullaby” with Phyllis. There’s a lot at stake, Nora realizes as she listens to her friend’s opening verse, for “bad singing, high-pitched bad singing in a foreign language would never be forgotten.” (172) In a relatively small county community where everyone knows everyone else, this could indeed be a life sentence. Signalling that it represents a key moment in Nora’s recovery, however, Tóibín dedicates a surprising number of words to describing her performance and the audience reaction. Again, the discourse veers between technical and affective descriptions. The song is not a particular success (a group in the corner sneer and mock throughout), and Nora vows to herself “never to do this again as long as she lived.” (174) But the seeds have been sown.

The second half of the novel sees Nora becoming more and more engaged with music and with the image of herself as a singer. The process begins in the car on the way home after the quiz, when Phyllis offers a technical assessment of Nora’s voice, and suggests that she should audition for a prestigious choir in Wexford Town. Again, Nora is conflicted. She associates singing with her mother, with whom, it slowly emerges, she did not enjoy a particularly warm or loving relationship. It’s the recurrence in her own personality of her mother’s

prickly pride that might prevent Nora from embracing the pleasures of singing. She allows herself to be persuaded, however, and applies to a local music teacher named Laurie O'Keefe to help prepare an audition programme. Laurie is aware of Nora's situation, and she it is who during their first meeting provides the epigraph for my chapter: "There is no better way to heal yourself than singing in a choir." (198) As she rehearses for her audition, Nora learns that the practices (both physical and mental) associated with singing – breathing, concentration, empathy, listening, timing, and a hundred other things – can assuage the dead hand of grief and encourage new perspectives which can in turn lead towards new modes of seeing and understanding, eventually a new mode of being. Nora learns, in other words, that "the music was leading her away from Maurice, away from her life with him, and her life with the children. But it was not merely that Maurice had no ear for music, and that music was something they had never shared. It was the intensity of her time here; she was alone with herself in a place where he would never have followed her, even in death." (204)

Nora's deep sorrow at the loss of Maurice is slowly mitigated by a regret that she has left it so relatively late in life to discover the "energy" (209) of music, and the realisation that she can access this energy through listening on the one hand and participation on the other. She joins a Gramophone Society with the local doctor and his wife, and as she listens with them to the first movement of a Beethoven 'cello trio, Nora starts to imagine realities other than the one which has claimed her, identities other than the one she has forged for herself: "What she had told no one, because it was too strange, was how much this music had come to stand for. It was her dream-life, a life she might have had if she had been born elsewhere ... She wondered if she was alone in having nothing in between the dullness of her own days and the sheer brilliance of this imagined life." (262–63)

The novel ends with Nora accepting Laurie's invitation to join a new choir formed specifically to sing Brahms's *German Requiem* in Wexford. Nora won't have a central role – she's not good enough – and the fantasy of her life as a professional singer will have to remain just that: a fantasy. However, she will participate in and contribute to the performance of a minor miracle: complex emotion from the past transposed into organized sound in the present. And that, as she begins to recover from the trauma of Maurice's loss, is enough. The novel ends with Nora at home waiting to play one of her favourite records, but enjoying the quietness of the house, "the silence broken only by the faint noises from Conor upstairs and the crackling of wood burning slowly in the fire." (311)

The ratio established in this final scene between sound (the anticipated music and the everyday noises of the resting house) and silence represents an accommodation between two energies that have been operating contrapuntally throughout the text. As Nora has been moving towards a perspective of herself as someone for whom music represents life, she has at the same time been renegotiating her relationship with silence. This too may be tracked across the arc of the narrative.

The word "silence" functions as a kind of leitmotif throughout the text, occurring on numerous occasions and in various contexts. Just as with the original Wagnerian leitmotif, however, every iteration modifies the theme itself to some degree; every recurrence of the word, that is, draws on an established meaning while at the same time pushing that meaning in new directions, depending on the situation in which it's introduced.⁴ Silence initially appears to be a negative force – the *absence* of something, in this case sound; but it can also be a positive energy – a place (as in the final scene quoted above) where

⁴ Calvin Brown was the first critic to think systematically about the use of leitmotif in literature (1948, 208–18); since then it has become a staple of music-oriented literary criticism.

identity can reside and contemplate itself. As Nora recovers from the trauma of Maurice's sudden absence she realizes that her task is not to evade or to eradicate silence but to learn to live with it on her own terms. And this is a task for which music represents a key resource.

As the novel commences, Nora is surrounded by ominous, oppressive silences of various kinds, many of which are associated with the house. She notices the silence that settles after switching off the television in annoyance at the canned laughter of an American show (28). Deep emotional and mental anxiety fills the silence that reigns after Nora watches the film *Gaslight* with her boys (84); and in the silence that descends during another film (*Lost Horizon*, directed by Frank Capra in 1937) she starts to realize that each family member has been primed to over-read every scenario in terms of their own grief. (91) As the space within which her relationship with Maurice was most fully formed, it's unsurprising that the silence consequent upon his absence should resonate most strongly in the house.

But silence exists outside the home also, shadowing Nora as she tries to find a role for herself within an everyday reality from which tragedy has temporarily exiled her. The crow-broken silence of her Aunt Josie's rural residence strikes Nora as ominous; (41) it was there, during his father's final illness, that Donal developed his stammer – a condition that Josie herself imputes to the house's prevailing silence (44). Still laboring under the weight of Maurice's loss, Nora feels as far away from the women in her new place of work "as silence was from sound." (60) She feels likewise excluded from the female members of her immediate family because they can "understand each other's silence," (108) whereas she has been banished into a realm in which silence is existentially infused with grief, loss, and trauma.

Most consistently, during the quiz scene alluded to earlier, silence counterpoints Nora's epiphany regarding the imminent significance of music in her life. There's the aggressive silence demanded by Phyllis as she reads the

controversial quiz results; (166) the awkward silence that descends after a man tries to condole with Nora; (167) the soothing silence that she longs for away from the noise and confusion of the bar; (169) and the formal silence demanded by Tom before Nora's public duet with Phyllis. (172) The growing symbolic weight of music during the second part of the text is achieved, not at the cost of, but in evolving dialogue with, the inevitable silence that music temporarily replaces.

After her discovery of the positive power of music midway through the book, there's a steady alteration in the role and representation of silence. Nora recognizes that the silence assumed on holiday by Aine is born of her increasing politicisation, not (or at least not directly) of residual grief for the death of her father. Loaded silences punctuate a dinner-time discussion instigated by Aine about the emerging "Troubles" in Northern Ireland. (191–92) Nora herself remembers with something like resentment how, during Laurie's extravagant performance conducting a charity concert some years before, her brother-in-law Jim had shook with silent laughter – an example of smalltown philistinism in which Maurice was equally implicated. (195)

Music defamiliarizes silence to the point at which Nora can hear it not as an absence but as a resonant presence, possessed of its own signifying potential, both negative and positive. She is struck, for example by the intensity of the silence that pervades Laurie's rehearsal room as the two women prepare for a performance of Thomas Moore's "The Last Rose of Summer." (200) The silence has an alarming quality on this occasion, but it represents a challenge to which Nora must find the courage to rise. She is aware also of the desolating silence of the monastery where Conor goes to school, a silence she associates with the unfair treatment of her son, and which she mobilizes all her limited resources to vociferously resist (226).

Nora does not reject silence, then, but learns to recognize its functional diversity – how every situation produces its own manifestation, and how she in

turn can manipulate the different silences within her own life. It is music, with its endlessly subtle deployment of the relationship between sound and silence that effects this epiphany; and it's appropriate that the music which leads directly to this insight (Schubert's song "An Die Musik") should be a hymn to the power of music to bring solace to those like Nora who, stricken by life, need assurance as to "the existence of a better time" in the future.

Eventually, music leads Nora towards a confrontation between silence and death, as she watches over the body during the night of her mother's wake: "[The] house became quiet. Una came and offered to stay instead of her, but Nora refused, and she suggested that her two sisters try to get some sleep. She would make sure that there were candles kept burning and that her mother was not alone on her last night in the world. There was silence in the house, broken sometimes by the passing of cars and by the rattling of the windows in the bedroom in the night wind." (287)

Nora's semi-conscious rumination on the mystery of her mother's death serves as an overture for her own encounter with Maurice's ghost – an encounter precipitated by the heightened emotional state brought on by listening to a Beethoven trio on record. In their dream conversation, Nora asks Maurice if it is the sound of the music that has summoned him from the dead, but her unmusical husband tells her that such is not the case. He offers hints which seem to echo Nora's own fears regarding the children; he also repeatedly mentions "one other" (295) who he cannot or will not name. A fair inference might be that Maurice is referring to himself, or to the memory of himself – the silence (created by his absence) with which Nora has to come to terms. The sequence ends when Nora is transported back into the land of the living by the sound "of a car horn beeping on the street." (295)

Music facilitates and accompanies Nora's recovery from the trauma of Maurice's death, then; the realisation that this is a process never to be fully completed does not detract from its beneficial impact. And because silence

represents an integral aspect of music itself, part of the lesson that Nora has to learn is how to live with silence: how to hear silence as part of the soundscape of her everyday life. Nora learns, in other words, not to defeat silence but, paradoxically, how to incorporate it as part of the song of herself. It's a difficult lesson, but one that we all could usefully learn.

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