A Very Quiet Triumph

Gideon Lewis-Kraus

Nora Webster
by Colm Tóibín.
Scribner, 373 pp., $27.00

Colm Tóibín's *Nora Webster* has been billed as a kind of companion volume to his last novel, *Brooklyn*. Both are stories of women raised at midcentury in small-town Ireland, where they were not expected to have, much less act upon, desires of their own. *Brooklyn*'s young Eilis Lacey goes dutifully from the confines of her province to work in America, where, after a time, she comes to appreciate the freedom of emigration, though not without later coming to understand its cost. *Nora Webster* is a rival study of a woman who stayed put into middle age and found, through marriage, shelter from the intrusiveness of local busybodies. After two decades of such quasi privacy, widowhood has left her once more vulnerable to the ordinary, punitive scrutiny of a "town where everybody knew about her and all the years ahead were mapped out for her." Her future is apparently set, and her trajectory is unlikely to have anything at all to do with her preferences.

The two novels seem best described not as companion volumes, however, but as two panels of a triptych about longing, and the expression and concealment of that longing. The third panel is *The Master*, Tóibín's 2004 novel about half a dozen years in the later life of Henry James. Nora and Eilis have been matter-of-factly expected neither to possess nor to express any desires of their own; Tóibín's James, by contrast, strongly suspects what it is that he wants—other men—but understands, from an early age, that these particular appetites must be restrained. Because all three novels deal in desire that's been stunted, thwarted, or forbidden—desire that resists articulation—they necessarily occupy themselves with different qualities and circumstances of silence. Henry James's innermost self is withdrawn and camouflaged because he's afraid of the distinct desire he might reveal. Eilis and Nora, in contrast, have withdrawn themselves because they're no longer sure, or they realize too late, what it is they might possibly want.

The three of them hesitate to speak because they're afraid of the consequences of being overheard and too well understood. Henry James took refuge in exile, which not only provided distance from scrutiny, but also served to hide his secret desires by imposing on them the homesickness and exhilaration of life as a watchful stranger. Neither Eilis, who as an immigrant makes journeys only between her home and adopted countries, nor Nora can afford the independent European travels that provide James some relief.

A good deal of Colm Tóibín's fiction is set in and around his hometown of Enniscorthy, County Wexford, in the southeast of Ireland; it's a small and inward-looking corner of a small and inward-looking island, so it ought to come as no surprise that a character in one novel is liable to come across or hear news of a character gone somehow astray from another one. Tóibín's characters find themselves under supervision even in novels that properly belong to other figures. These encounters contribute to the sense of claustrophobic accountability that characterizes Tóibín's county. The central reckoning of *Brooklyn* is brought about by this scarcity of privacy. Eilis Lacey is followed home to Enniscorthy by a secret decision she made in Brooklyn—a secret that is revealed by a local shopkeeper who happens to be the cousin of Eilis's landlady in Brooklyn.

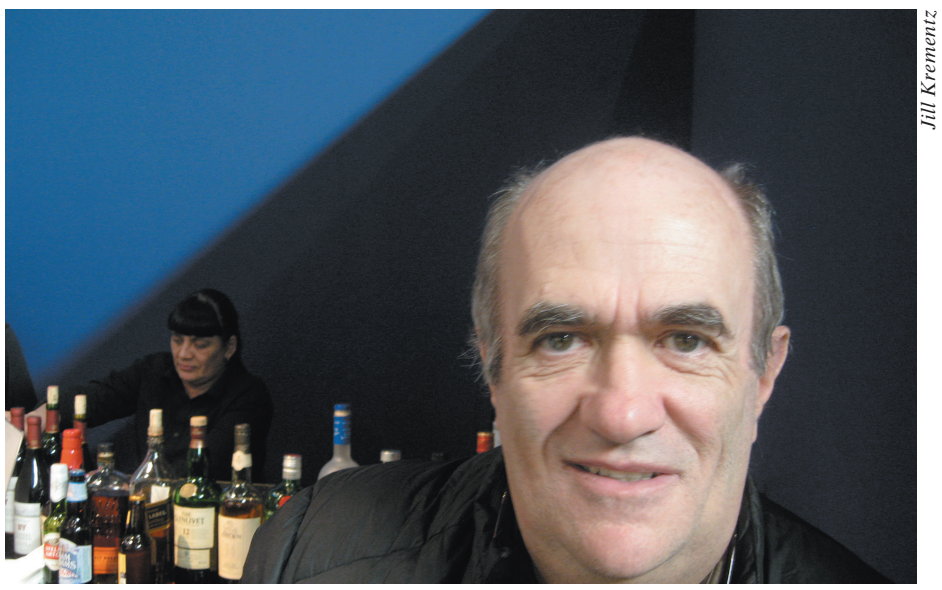
Toward the end of *Brooklyn*, when Eilis is home in Enniscorthy for a visit, she joins friends for a day at the seaside, where her family had intermittently rented a ramshackle cottage from a woman called Nora Webster. Now that Nora Webster has been given her own novel, one of the first people she meets is May Lacey, Eilis's mother, who has come to pay a condolence call. Nora does not welcome these visits. What Nora says of May might just as well be said by any given neighbor about another:

> She had known her all her life, like so many in the town, to greet and exchange pleasantries with, or to stop and talk to if there was news. She knew the story of her life down to her maiden name and the plot in the graveyard where she would be buried.

Though she knows the townspeople mean well, these encounters demand that she act out the social role of the grieving widow. Nora is actually bereft, but either she's unwilling to show that bereftness or she simply doesn't know the lines she's expected to recite. Her neighbor takes a new tone, speaking to her "as though he had some authority over her," saying that if he were in her position, he simply wouldn't answer the door. But she's well aware that only men are granted the pride of refusal. The local women would never forgive her if she didn't make a show of including them.

May Lacey implies that she's never quite forgiven Eilis for her immigration to distant, roomy, anonymous America. Their desultory exchange indicates that Nora and Eilis must be rough contemporaries; Nora's late husband was friendly with Eilis's older brother. Though Tóibín fixes any external events at a remove, like distant buoys in a foggy sea, it's possible to determine that *Nora Webster* has begun sixteen years after *Brooklyn* left off. The two novels, which have no explicit connection after this introductory interview, present themselves in the form of alternate paths: had Eilis not left for New York in 1951, her life in the Enniscorthy of 1968 would likely as not rather resemble Nora's.

Virtually nothing happens on the surface of *Nora Webster*. Nora tends, with anxious tentativeness and considered neglect, to her children, two older girls away at school or training, and two younger boys at home. She sees her own aunt, her late husband's siblings, and, more sporadically, her sisters. She's prickly and exasperates everybody. She returns to a clerical job she'd hated and left when she got married, and takes singing lessons. The family rents a trailer near the sea for a week in the summer, and, though Nora's never even seen London, she boards her first airplane for a brief but restorative package vacation in Spain.



Jill Krementz

Colm Tóibín, New York City, 2014; photograph by Jill Krementz

The book takes place over roughly three years, and in the background—almost always on television—news filters down of the lunar landing, the Bloody Sunday riots, and the domestic political changes that took place in Ireland in the early 1970s. But all of the muted, constricted eventlessness on the surface is just a way to draw readerly attention and sympathy to the lurching, painful transformations underneath; Nora comes to recognize for the first time the real, if limited, possibility of her own aspiration. Tóibín has been praised by critics for creating a character who seems persuasively private, but his mastery here is even subtler. Nora is not private because she's protecting something in particular, as Tóibín's James is; she's private because she suspects she might have nothing at all to keep to herself.

Nora has always been vexing. She's always wanted more—in the indeterminate, objectless way of a basic hunger—than what she was supposed to accept as her share. These are attributes she's come by honestly. As a nun tells her:

> Your mother was the same. I knew her when she sang. She was a wonderful singer, but it was the pride, or the not liking people knowing her business, that made her difficult. And that did her no good.

When Nora was fourteen, her father died, and Nora had to quit school to go work in the office of the Gibneys, a local dynasty. The vague ambition she'd had for herself was channeled into the desire for an ambitious man: the rule she and a friend had "that they would speak only to men who knew syntax and they would ignore anyone who used bad grammar began as a joke, but slowly it became serious for them." At twenty-five she married Maurice, a schoolteacher who was widely liked and admired. "It was true, Nora thought, what her mother had said; they all, including her sisters, preferred Maurice to her and listened more to what he said."

The passing references to Maurice in the book make him out to be a man equally committed to the moral cultivation of his students and the political life of the country. Though Nora admits she was never quite as politically engaged as he was—it wasn't her place to be—she's aware that she and Maurice shared views on Ireland's "modernisation" that were more progressive than the views of those around her. Politics aside, they found in each other refuge from idle badinage. At an evening at a golf club, Nora listens to the superficial chatter about the relative merits of different golf courses and thinks to herself "that this was the sort of conversation that Maurice had despised all of his life, despised almost as much as she did now."

Life with Maurice delivered her of the drudgery of the office and the petty gossip of the neighborhood. Maurice, after consulting with her, decided when to stay at a party or a pub and when to leave. Nora loved being married, not least of all because of the simple fact of marriage, the protections it provided: she could be out, with Maurice beside her, and "everyone in the party knew that she was married to him." She recalls it as a matter of freedom:

> She thought of the freedom that marriage to Maurice had given her, the freedom, once the children were in school, or a young child was sleeping, to walk into this room at any time of the day and take down a book and read; the freedom to go into the front room at any time and look out of the window at the street and Vinegar Hill across the valley or the clouds in the sky, letting her mind be idle, going back to the kitchen, or to attend to the children when they came home from school but as part of a life of ease which included duty. The day belonged to her, even if others could call on her, take up her time, distract her. Never once, in the twenty-one years she had run this household, had she felt a moment of boredom or frustration.

All of the freedoms she enumerates in this passage are not freedoms to but freedoms from. Her married life has not exactly afforded her the opportunity to do whatever she wants; after all, she sought out the marriage so that she could escape the frustration of not getting what she might have wanted, choosing instead to submerge her unfulfilled desires and accept the protection and the desires of her husband. What her married life has afforded her is a particular kind of solitude: she is freed from being held to account since it is assumed that wives are held accountable by their husbands. It would represent a violation of the man's property for someone to ask a wife why, for example, she's reading a book in the daytime, or staring idly at the clouds. Marriage has allowed Nora a way to withdraw from the gamesmanship of frivolous conversation, from having to pretend that she actually took an interest in such matters as the state of the golf course.

Widowhood is thus jarring not only because she misses Maurice, but because she feels exposed in her withdrawal. This withdrawal is taken not as absence but as self-important presence—as pridefulness. Yet she withdraws not out of pride but out of a complex sense of lack: she lacks not only Maurice but the cover he provided her, the way his wishes both structured her days and protected her from the sleeping abyss of her own detachment. One of the most difficult effects of his absence is that she must now reckon with a horrible indifference. She feels a new boredom, a new frustration, and a new ostracism in polite company. After an evening with her sister and her sister's insufferable, grandiose friend, she thinks:

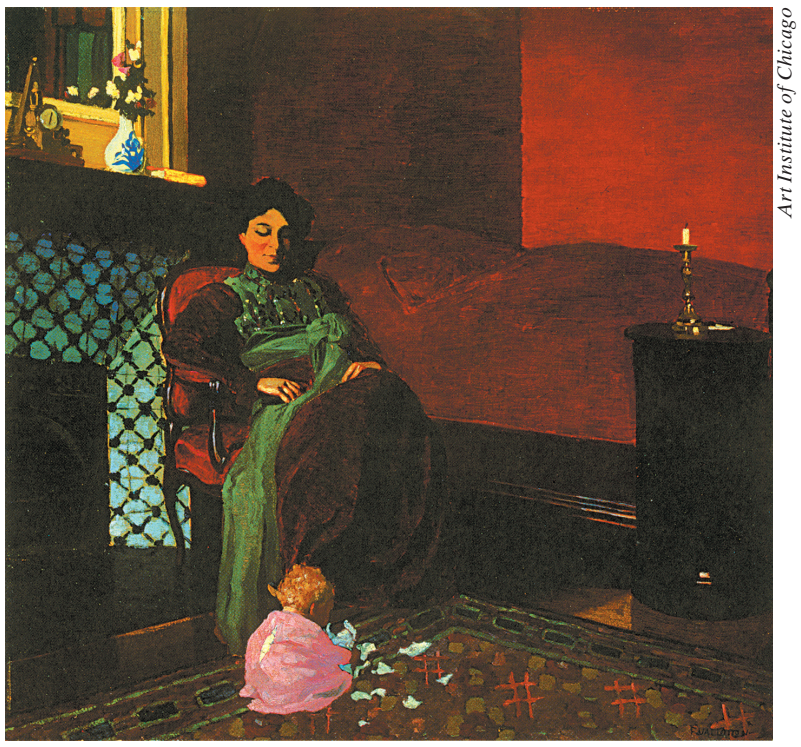
> It was clear to her that there was nothing she could have spoken to Catherine and Dilly about, nothing that would have interested her or them. When she asked herself what she was interested in, she had to conclude that she was interested in nothing at all. What mattered to her now could be shared with no one.... This was what no one had told her about. She could not have ordinary feelings, ordinary desires.

This desirelessness makes itself felt in the novel as a very powerful sense of quiet. *Nora Webster* is an almost excruciatingly quiet book, so much so that when there's even a knock at the door or the scream of a child, the reader sits up with a start. There's considerable dialogue, but the words themselves are subordinated to the stage directions. These have a rudimentary quality. Almost every exchange is given shape by three elemental bearings: where someone stands, where she looks, and the volume of her speech. The effect is that what is said is less important than the brute position of the speakers. Even the book's most minor conversations enact miniature dramas of proximity and attention. Tóibín draws on a diminished and consistent deck of simple adverbs: people watch each other or things "closely"; they listen to or eye each other "carefully"; they nod "gravely"; they wait "cautiously." The implication is that actions can be dispensed with descriptively in broad strokes, because the things that count happen on the margin.

Nora notices the way her house, with Maurice gone, is "filled with absence." The first two thirds of the book are similarly filled with silence, at times companionable and at times antagonistic. So much silence, and so much emphasis on silence, gesture toward a paradox at the heart of the county's claustrophobic omniscience. On the one hand, everybody feels as though they know, and have a right to know, everybody else's business. It's almost impossible to hide anything. On the other hand, however, there's a big difference between those things that are putatively known for certain—those things that are spoken aloud—and those that are only vaguely perceived or suspected. Things that are spoken get recorded, and remembered, and passed on. As Nora frets, in a pivotal scene in which she and a new friend stand up in a pub to sing a duet partly in German,

> She could see the unforgiving faces around them. Any display made them uncomfortable, even a new car or a new combine harvester, or the first pair of slacks on a woman. But bad singing, high-pitched bad singing in a foreign language, would never be forgotten. It would be a cause of comment for years to come.

Desires that are more indistinctly registered, however, are granted the luxury of a limited, ephemeral existence. This distinction is crucial to the communication of feelings and preferences that people might want, on some submerged level, to be understood by a few others, even as they'd also prefer to maintain a surface sheen of plausible deniability. These are desires that people such as Nora would prefer they didn't have to defend—because they're indefensible, or fragile, or simply mysterious to themselves.



Art Institute of Chicago

Painting by Félix Vallotton, 1899

In *The Master*, Tóibín presents James's decorous silences as his way of handling precisely this situation: his desire for other men was both masterfully concealed and, if never articulated outright, exquisitely expressed in pianissimo. The kind of subtlety this required, Tóibín suggests, gave James the ability to represent the lives and decisions of such heroines as Maggie Verver, who spends the second half of *The Golden Bowl* saying virtually nothing at all yet ultimately achieving, with no disturbance to the placid surface of her family's lives, exactly what she aimed to do.

It takes most of *Nora Webster* for Tóibín's heroine even to discover what it is she might want to do, and when she does it's a very quiet triumph indeed: she discovers, as she begins to attend singing lessons, a long-suppressed passion for music. It's a very clever resolution to her problem, because song is a medium in which one might be expressive without having to be articulate. She can be emotional without being asked to give an account for why. It is also the passion that stirred her mother, though part of the reason she'd never taken singing seriously was because her mother had made it clear that there was room only for one singer in the family.

Now that her mother and her husband are dead she can take possession of this inheritance. The way this desire thus comes full circle, from a resentful mother to a daughter growing out of her resentment, gives form to the novel. The pursuit of this desire helps her achieve, with time, a new, if slight, sense of self-possession. She sells off a summer cottage she didn't much like and, supported by an increased state subsidy for widows, she refurbishes the back room in her house:

> She had to remind herself that she was free now, that there was no Maurice who would be cautious about costs, and grumpy about anything that would cause disruption to his routine. She was free. She could make any decision she liked about the house. She felt almost guilt as it occurred to her now that she could do whatever pleased her. It could all be done, anything she wanted, as long as she could afford it. If Jim and Margaret disapproved, or her sisters or daughters came with advice, she could ignore all of them.

She buys a stereo to listen to the new records that give her comfort. How meaningful it is to discover and tend to even the smallest desire. She might not even find it necessary to defend it:

> They would all see it now, all of her visitors, Nora thought, and they would think her extravagant. She would have to steel herself, no matter what comments they made, not to care. She had wanted this and now she had it.

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