

Culture Shock

Fintan O'Toole



Silence: a weapon the Irish have used to fight oblivion

In some ways it seems a bit of a puzzle that in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, which was published a century ago, James Joyce's alter ego, Stephen Dedalus, listed silence as one of his three weapons.

"I will tell you what I will do and what I will not do. I will not serve that in which I no longer believe, whether it calls itself my home, my fatherland, or my church: and I will try to express myself in some mode of life or art as freely as I can and as wholly as I can, using for my defense the only arms I allow myself to use – silence, exile, and cunning."

Exile is obvious enough, and cunning (both low and high) is essential to art. But surely silence is the enemy of expression. Well, not in Irish writing it isn't.

I was thinking of this in relation to two books I read recently. One is Sebastian Barry's wonderful *Days without End*, which won the Costa novel award this week. It is beautifully expressed. But it is even more powerfully silent. Ludwig Wittgenstein famously warned that "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent." And one of the motors of Irish writing is that there is so much that cannot be spoken of.

In this case it is the Great Hunger. Barry's Thomas McNulty is a refugee from

the Famine, a survivor of horrors. But what makes the novel so potent is that so little is said of all this. We get just enough of it to understand Thomas's capacity for cruelty as a soldier in the Indian wars. The aesthetic force, though, lies in the withholding.

"Hunger takes away what you are. Everything we were was just nothing then. Talk, music, Sligo, stories, future, past, it was all turned to something very like the shit of animals. . . . And that's enough of that, I say, I don't want to say no more. Silence."

This centrality of silence is why it is not quite right to talk of *Days without End* as a historical novel. True, it is a novel set in the past, and it involves itself with historical events, especially the genocide against the Indians and the American Civil War. But the historical novel, rooted in the traditions of Walter Scott and Leo Tolstoy, aims to be as much history as it is fiction.

In Britain, for example, Hilary Mantel's novels delve very deeply into the major historical forces at work in the periods she sets them in – Tudor England in the case of the Thomas Cromwell novels – and seek to understand them as thoroughly and precisely as any historian using archival sources.

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Irish writers have long followed James Joyce's example in tapping into the power of the unspoken – and the unspeakable

But the Irish novel of history isn't really like this. It has too much silence in it. There are some proper historical novels in the Irish tradition – James Plunkett's *Strumpet City* is the outstanding one – but they are untypical.

I was thinking of silence, too, in relation to a completely different set of stories. I was looking again at the Icelandic sagas, those astonishing creations of the 13th century that foreshadow the European novel in so many intriguing ways. Silence arrives in one of them, and it arrives with an Irish character.

One of the big figures, Hoskuld, decides to buy a woman to serve as a sexual and domestic slave. The slave trader has a dozen women on offer, but Hoskuld is drawn to one who is raggedly dressed but good-looking. Before the deal is done the trader warns Hoskuld that she has a major defect: "The woman cannot speak. I have tried in many ways to get her to speak, but never got so much as a word from her."

After he brings her home the young woman, who is both in exile and cunning, continues to use silence as one of her weapons. It is only after Hoskuld has fathered a child with her that he is out in the fields one day, hears voices and follows the sound.

There is the slave woman speaking to her little son: "He realised she was anything but dumb, as she had plenty to say to the boy." She has to admit that she can speak after all and to reveal her name and history.

"If you wish to know my name, it is Melkorka. . . . My father is Myrkjartan [presumably MacCartan]; he is a king in Ireland. I was taken captive there at the age of fifteen."

Afterwards we discover that the language Melkorka has been speaking is Irish. Her son, Olaf, grows up speaking it so fluently that when he sails to Ireland to find his grandfather he is well able to communicate with the natives.

There's a direct link between the Melkorka's silence and Thomas McNulty's. Their silences are strategic, and they function as ways of dealing with, and surviving, traumatic exile. We have learned to think of silence only as a kind of illness – with very good reason: "breaking the silence" has been a major theme of recent Irish culture. But it has also been a weapon with which to fight oblivion.

Joyce knew that and chose not to write directly about so much of what he knew. Irish writers have long followed his example in tapping into the power of the unspoken – and the unspeakable.

Enough to make you dive back under the hospital covers



Mick Heaney Radio

The trolley crisis has a wearily familiar sound. A bit like Joe Jackson's Leonard Cohen tapes

In a week when presenters such as Sean O'Rourke and Pat Kenny fill out airtime with panel discussions about what to expect in 2017, it turns out that we should have seen the biggest story of the new year coming. That, at least, is the message emerging from coverage of the hospital trolley crisis. Across the board, consultants' accounts of patients lying on gurneys in corridors are accompanied by remarks that the whole sorry situation was entirely foreseeable.

On *Today with Sean O'Rourke* (RTÉ Radio 1, weekdays) Dr Jim Gray of Tallaght Hospital wearily notes that "there's a predictability here". Earlier, on *Morning Ireland* (RTÉ Radio 1, weekdays), Dr Fergal Hickey of Sligo University Hospital dismisses Health Minister Simon Harris's assertion that the surge in A&E admissions was unexpected: "To suggest this is unpredictable or unprecedented is simply nonsense."

There's no need for a crystal ball when the core problem, according to these frontline staff, is simple: too few hospital beds. When Hickey pops up again on *The Pat Kenny Show* (Newstalk, weekdays) he says that Ireland has far fewer beds per head than average for the developed world. Last year, he adds, more than 90,000 patients – equal to the population of Limerick city – had their hospital care delivered to them on trolleys. It's enough to make you dive back under the covers in terror – assuming you have a bed to begin with.

Perhaps the most dispiriting remark comes from Prof Anthony Staines of Dublin City University, who tells Kenny that "they closed a scud of hospital beds in the 1970s and 1980s, and the system hasn't recovered from that".

Still, before one starts harking back to that bygone era, it's worth listening to *Sure 'Twas Better* (RTÉ Radio 1, weekdays) as a corrective to any incipient nostalgia. Presented by Will Hanafin, the programme

Moment of the Week Special relationship?

Slips of the tongue are a fact of life in live broadcasting, but occasionally they tell a truth that Freud would be proud of. Presenting the *It Says in the Papers* slot on *Morning Ireland* (RTÉ Radio 1) on Thursday, Carol Murphy comments on a newspaper report about fears that the Ash for Cash political crisis in Northern Ireland could further destabilise Brexit negotiations, with the governing executive ceding power to Westminster. Or, as Murphy says, "elections could lead to control being handed back to Washington". The UK may sometimes be called the 51st State, but, even post-Brexit, it surely hasn't come to that yet.

features archive audio clips from the 1970s on topics such as sex education and gay rights; they're a handy guide to how attitudes have changed.

In one excerpt Doireann Ní Bhriain interviews young Dublin men who admit to a startling lack of knowledge about the reproductive act, never mind women's physiology. Asked why he had never spoken to his parents about these things, one man replies that he would have got a belt had he inquired.

Elsewhere a young David Norris argues for the decriminalisation of homosexuality with the late Fianna Fáil TD Noel Davern. It's not edifying: callers queue up to denounce homosexuality, or "sodomy", as "unnatural", and Davern doesn't even bother pronouncing Norris's name correctly.

For all that, a slightly smug tone runs through the programme, as the comedian Colm O'Regan and the writer Jules Coll comment on each clip with a condescension that only hindsight allows. "I am so glad times have changed, because that makes me really sad," Coll says after the Norris item.

It's natural for her to be upset about the intolerant mindset on show; it's harder to share her certainty that things have automatically improved in our era of "freedom", as opposed to the era when "there were a lot of rules and regulations".

Likewise, the mockery of old adverts is a bit obvious, not to say tedious. Given how quickly advertising fashions change, laughing at the would-be sophistication of products such as Cinzano vermouth and Ritmeester Dutch cigars is like shooting fish in a barrel: one suspects the self-conscious irony of so much current advertising will provide an even more target-rich environment for future observers.

There's the odd telling observation, as when O'Regan remarks that people who look back fondly on the good old days tend to be from the societal mainstream and not ones who were shunned as outsiders.

Perhaps that's the most to be expected from what is essentially a slice of bank-holiday whimsy. That the voices from the past provide much more interest than those passing judgment on them tells its own story, however.

Similarly, there's no need to embellish the raw material at the heart of *The Joe Jackson Tapes Revisited: Leonard Cohen* (RTÉ Radio 1, Tuesday), if indeed we need to hear it at all. The tapes in question are cassettes from interviews Jackson did for *Hot Press* magazine in the 1980s, and the order of the names in the portentous programme title is no accident. Fans of Cohen may enjoy hearing him meditate on his work in his mellifluous baritone, but they hear a great deal more from – and about – Jackson.

For the most part the tapes take a back seat to Jackson's commentary. He explains why he asked the questions he did, with frequent reference to his past life, from his poetic efforts to his being "betrayed" by his first girlfriend. Even when Cohen is heard it's frequently in a supporting role, whether urging the journalist to submit a manuscript for publication or assuring him that "it was a pleasure talking to you".

The result is by turns frustrating and preposterous. There are fleeting glimpses into Cohen's creative process, but a more accurate title might be *Leonard Cohen: His Part in My Victory*, to paraphrase Spike Milligan's third wartime memoir. "You have to remember these tapes were made for print rather than broadcast," Jackson remarks at one point. Well, he said it.



Won't someone please think of the Huberman?



Peter Crawley Television

'Striking Out', RTE's new comedy, frames itself, oddly, around a catatonically depressed central character

Striking Out (RTÉ One, Sunday), ostensibly a drama starring Amy Huberman, really poses a more curious question. What would happen were you to frame the plot and palaver of a comedy around a central character who is, to all appearances, catatonically depressed?

Our introduction to Tara Rafferty, a solicitor out on her hen night, doubles as an introduction to a sheeny idea of Dublin, where the corporate cluster of Grand Canal Dock and its red lightsabre sculpture dissolves into a shot of similarly designed cocktails: attractive but toxic. That's a fitting toast to this part of the capital in 2016.

With an amorous surge of carpe diem, Tara abandons her hen party only to find her chiselled fiancé, Eric (Rory Keenan), pinned beneath another woman. Here the director, Lisa James Larsson, understandingly abandons the dialogue ("Are you having an affair?" "Sweetheart, this means nothing!") for a solemn, slow-motion sequence of a wronged woman lashing a semi-naked man with a giant inflatable penis.

Such is the tone of James Phelan's new series, where the heartbreaks of life come as ludicrous clichés while its director, star and audience discover the awkward consequences of taking them utterly seriously.

A Hollywood screenwriter once shared a depressingly familiar tactic for making her female protagonists "adorable" – to patriarchal culture: "You have to defeat her at the beginning. Abuse and break her, strip

her of her dignity, and then she gets to live out our fantasies and have fun." In *Striking Out* Phelan and his fellow writer Rob Hyland achieve the first part of this dismal formula in less than four minutes. But for Tara the fun never starts.

Shoeless and unblinking, she stealthily clears out her office the next morning (Eric works at the firm; his father is a partner), running into a young offender named Ray (nicely played by Emmet Byrne), who later becomes her first employee in a new practice operating from a waterfront coffee shop.

Still, not even her first big case, an injunction to prevent the publication of a celebrity sex tape, brings Tara any respite from somnambulant grief. Instead we get a profoundly isolated character with apparently no female friends (her mother, played by Ingrid Craigie, sides with the cheating fiancé; the abandoned hen party barely ask after her disappearance) and only male supporters: Neil Morrissey as an older, distracted barrister, Nick Dunning as a vaguely supportive father. So Huberman struggles to locate any character, shown weeping tides of mascara in the shower or staring shellshocked into the distance. It's hard to demonstrate personality when you're left so alone.

I preferred when Tara proudly presented herself to the manager of an underground sex club, as she became the protector of a celebrity sex addict's privacy. There, among the whips and harnesses, it seemed the right time to stop being submissive. Whether Tara can reconcile this show's weird comedy and supposed drama, or develop a character to rival her burgeoning practice, depends first on choosing to represent herself.

In one of Arthur Conan Doyle's own favourite Sherlock Holmes stories, the detective takes a glance at an ordinary-looking fellow and deduces that he is a former labourer, current snuff-taker and Freemason, who has spent time in China and done plen-

ty of writing. The visitor and Dr Watson are stunned. Holmes talks them dryly through his processes. "Well, I never!" the visitor says, laughing. "I thought at first you had done something clever, but I see there was nothing in it after all."

To Sherlockologists, rarely mistreated by Steven Moffat and Mark Gatiss's cheerily propulsive *Sherlock* (BBC One, Sunday), hearing those words repeated with a small update ("It's dead simple, innit?") brings a double-braced pleasure, lightly demonstrating the writers' expertise in the source material while scattering clues both mysterious and literary throughout the narrative.

In the first episode of what may be *Sherlock*'s last series Holmes doesn't even bother with the gen's case, though. Summarily delivered from the tangles at the end of the

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third season, he now dismisses a stack of them as too trivial to be worth his time. You suspect Moffat and Gatiss are also discarding surplus ideas, as though in a fire sale.

Yet *The Six Thatchers* still amasses text as though overwrought with research. In passing we get one locked-room mystery (a long-dead body incinerated in an apparently empty car), but otherwise, stretching from London to Tbilisi, and Iraq to Morocco, the plot goes around the houses.

Through it all everyone expects superhuman ability from Holmes while complaining that he can't be more human. Benedict Cumberbatch's Holmes, a tousle-haired, mercurial automaton, is still a career best, and Martin Freeman's Watson, now

■ Alone: Amy Huberman in *Striking Out*

chafing at being a family man with the semi-retired superspy Mary (Amanda Abbington), is less his adoring blogger biographer than peevish doormat. This is partly because TV writers require emotional development from long-running shows and partly because these days everyone with a smartphone is a potential Holmes. "What are you? Wikipedia?" Holmes asks his brother, Mycroft. "Yes," he responds. Simple, innit?

Or, as Dory, the amateur sleuth of *Search Party* (streaming on All4), reads from a conveniently annotated copy of *Anna Karenina*, "The pleasure lies not in discovering truth, but in searching for it." The book belongs to Chantal Winterbottom, a young woman who has gone missing, now pursued by Dory, a young woman who may as well have. "Would anyone care if something happened to me?" Dory (a brilliantly earnest Alia Shawkat) wonders in one of the funniest, sharpest, most wickedly barbed shows around.

When their barely remembered college friend disappears four Brooklyn-based twentynothings make it about themselves, taking to social media to hashtag their feelings. (The missing person is already trending under #IAMChantal.) In the wrong hands that joke would get thin fast, but although the characters have no self-insight this finely detailed show absolutely knows the score. It manages to be dryly self-aware, with an impressive laugh rate, while somehow remaining forgivingly warm.

In an early moment the camera pulls gently back from Dory and her sappy boyfriend, Drew, during a screeching argument on the street to reveal somebody impassively videoing it all on his phone. Everybody here is watching and nobody is quite living.

That's why Dory, wielding her iPhone like a magnifying glass, takes to detection with such zeal: she begins to find significance in everything, following clues through a hilarious trail of property companies, bizarre fetish rings and furniture-store-based cults, with a rotation of shifty accomplices. *Sherlock* and *Striking Out* could learn from both her adventures and her agency: straddling genres without losing her footing, and bringing a solution to the well-wrought mystery both shattering and satisfying. Case closed.

Ones to Watch Bowie's last years, Taboo's first

■ A year after his death comes a new documentary on David Bowie's final three projects, in *David Bowie: The Last Five Years* (BBC Two, Saturday and Monday).



■ Everyone's talking about *Taboo* (BBC One, Saturday), Steven Knight's new show, in which Tom Hardy plays a Victorian adventurer taking on the might of the East India Shipping Company.