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The Anomie of Silence in Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*

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In recent interventions, critics have again invoked the figure of silence, urging its reconceptualization and seeking its dislodgment from a traditional position as the opposite of voice, or “a trope of oppression, passivity, emptiness, stupidity, or obedience” (2), as Cheryl Glenn describes it in *Unspoken: A Rhetoric of Silence* (2004). In an effort to respond to this call, this article brings together two concepts—silence and anomie—and reframes the normative application of both. Spanning the senses of monstrosity and transgression, disorder, uncertainty, and madness in texts dating as far as back as the fifth century BCE, anomie offers an occasion to probe the interstices between and among several sets of important dichotomous terms: law (lawfulness) and lawlessness, order and disorder, certainty and uncertainty, unicity and multiplicity, even active or productive living and suicide. Though the term's most prominent articulation emerged in the social theories of Emile Durkheim, since the turn of the twentieth century it has been applied widely in the fields of sociology, psychology, and criminal justice. In the realms of literary studies and philosophy particularly, anomie serves a premise for an influential distinction between high modernism and its successor in Fredric Jameson's seminal work *Postmodernism* (1991), and has been identified as the crux in the dispute between Walter Benjamin and Carl Schmitt, and of the political situation in post-September 11th United States, by Giorgio Agamben in *State of Exception* (2005).

Anomie is a useful term, because it illuminates an out-of-jointness, lawlessness, a dispersal or anomaly at the very heart of what is considered to be a unity, a law, or a centralized location. Although to answer the question “what is anomie?” directly, as Marco Orrù clarifies, is difficult if not impossible. Orrù's *Anomie: History and Meanings* (1987) is acknowledged by

scholars in his field of social studies as the most definitive, comprehensive and concentrated study of anomie to date. “For some writers,” he explains, “anomie is the absence of cultural restraints on human aspirations, for others it denotes a conflict of belief-systems in a society; anomie also describes the imbalance between cultural goals and institutional means at either the social or the individual level, or a psychological condition of self-to-other alienation” (1-2). Although there is no established etymological relation between the two, over time anomie and anomaly (or more specifically *a-nomos*, ἄνομός, and *an-homalos*, ἀνώμαλος) came to share the meaning of non-conformity or of difference—“anomalous” denoting uneven, unequal, and diverse as well as “uncomfortable to the common order; deviating from rule, irregular; or abnormal” (OED). During the 15th and 16th centuries, anomie, anomaly, and their variations overlapped in meaning or were used synonymously to identify an absence of law or norm (qtd. in Orrù 66). J. Hillis Miller, however, apprehends the relationship between the two somewhat differently, considering “lawless” to be the strong meaning of “anomalous” (43).

First located in the ancient Greek to denote lawlessness, anomie is comprised of the prefix “a-” and the root word *nomos* (a derivative of *nemos*). Unlike the alpha privative, “a-,” used to signify want or absence (Liddell and Scott 1) or negation “not” (Barnhart 1), which has not incurred radical changes over time, *nomos* has undergone various shifts in meaning and connotation. In certain ancient Greek texts—by Homer, Sophocles, and Herodotus—it signifies a pasture; a feeding place or a place of dwelling, allotted or assigned to one; or the law of the force of hands in a fight (Liddell and Scott 535). The verb *nemein* that gives rise to *nomos*, as Costas Douzinas and Ronnie Warrington indicate, bears the senses of “dividing, breaking up, sending away in many directions, without pattern, structure or aim” (220). Through *nemein*, *nomos* comes to refer also to wandering, a random quest for grazing fields (218) and, in Heidegger, to

“the *nomos* of Being [as] a nomadic assignation” (220). The initial spatial denotation of *nomos* in the ancient Greek is gradually displaced by the forces interpenetrating in each of the indicated spaces: the force of sustenance of the pasture; a force that allots and a force that inhabits the lot or dwelling, fused together; and the forces that converge in the combative gestures of a hand. From a literal location, *nomos* evolves into enforcement, a decree of right and a division by right—dispensed in ancient Greece by the gods—akin in meaning to *eimarmenos*, that which is destined, allotted, distributed and decreed by Moira,¹ the goddess of fate (Liddell and Scott 494), in a double-movement of giving and taking away. This movement is immanent to the Proto Indo-European lemma “nem-,” which indicates not only taking, putting in a position of order, and bending but also vengeance and gift (Pokorny 763-764). Modern languages have retained the sense of assignment and seizure (*nehmen* in the German) as well as a meaningless frequently cited and examined, that of muteness (*немота* in the Russian and the Bulgarian).² One might posit that the latter is asilence that accompanies Moira’s “gifts,” a muteness that is both submissive and resistant to the consecration of *nomos*, fate, the normative, the customary, and the predetermined, that is the just and the sacred.

The senses of muteness and wandering, brought together in *nomos*, are especially significant to the endeavor of this article to examine the multiplicitous deployments of silence in Foer’s text through the richly nuanced conception of anomie as a state of exception. While in *Homo Sacer* (1998), the text that precedes *State of Exception*, Giorgio Agamben does not theorize anomie by using the term directly, the concept is, nevertheless, implicitly articulated as “a limit-figure of life, a threshold in which life is both inside and outside the juridical order”

¹ In his article “Anomie as Dérèglement,” Stjepan Meštrović also points to the proximity between *nomos* and Moira (83).

² In “Miscellaneous Problems in IE languages VII,” Jens Elmegard Rasmussen points out the connection between *nem- and the Old Church Slavic němъ “mute” (653).

(*Homo Sacer* 27). In the monograph, focused explicitly on anomie, he writes: “The state of exception is neither external nor internal to the juridical order, and the problem of defining it concerns precisely a threshold, or a zone of indifference, where inside and outside do not exclude each other but rather blur with each other” (*State* 23). Because in the state of exception, a zone devoid of a juridical foundation, the force of law is in effect without law (*anomos*), only a force-of-law operates that cannot be called either legal or illegal and that is, therefore, available for appropriation. To Agamben, there is no inherent connection between law and life, which is why the force-of-law relies on the state of exception to make possible its attachment to and appropriation of life, its own actualization. His consideration of the function of the zone of indeterminacy as detrimental is indicative of an assumption that the force-of-law is violent, destructive, and negative, an assumption verified by the particular historical instance of a state of exception in question, namely Germany under the Nazi regime and the resulting Holocaust. The perniciousness of a state of exception, Agamben argues, lies in its ability to conceal its undecidability while simulating the proper functioning of a legal juridical system, which allows “the sovereign” (the state) to become force-of-law. “To live in the state of exception,” he writes, “is to experience both [a force that institutes and makes, and one that deactivates and deposes]” (87). Similarly contradictory and complex is the position of silence—both within and outside of sound and language; a mode that releases (gives) and interns (takes away) at the same time; simultaneously a deterrent that deactivates and a catalyst that actuates.

In *Speaking Silences* (1994), Andrew Ettin points out that there is something paradoxical in discoursing about silence and something irresistible about querying into this notion, with its complex web of material and conceptual affinities and the long history of its problematization. Indeed, specialists in a range of fields—including literature, philosophy, social sciences,

medicine, and physics—have sought to examine the locations and parameters of silence, discovering it in the ear (deafness), in the mouth (mutism), in discourse (pause), in memory (Alzheimer’s), in-between one person and another (absence of verbal communication), in the spirit (Buddhism), in music (rest), in law (the right to silence), and in culture (Michel Foucault’s conception of a “culture of silence”), to mention but a few. Many have found the opposition of silence and sound to be illusory, or have gone as far as dubbing silence “non-existent” (John Cage). Ettin writes that “Perhaps it is a phantom: there really is no silence, because within the seeming silence lies the white noise of our own meaning.” In this sense, silence takes the form both of pauses, spaces or moments, that have been deliberately interposed in a structure and of inadvertent inflections that have inserted themselves in objects of a particular order, frequency, or parameters from which they are distinct. Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005) reveals both.

At the forefront of Foer’s text is nine-year-old Oskar Shell, who is trying to cope with the death of his father on September 11, 2001, and the relationships of which Oscar becomes a part in the process of mourning. A year after his father’s death, he finds a mysterious key in a blue vase, on the top shelf, in his father’s closet, and commences a search for the lock. His quest brings him in contact with a variety of people, their losses, and the ways in which they live with the ache of losing. Woven into the main plot is the predominantly epistolary sub-narrative of the relationship between Oscar’s paternal grandparents both of who are survivors of the Dresden firebombings of 1945. As Kristiaan Versluys observes in “A Rose Is Not a Rose Is Not a Rose,” some critics have found this plotline to be unnecessary; yet, I must concur with his point that this facet enriches the novel through the “analogies and contrasts” it mobilizes. Unlike Versluys, who sees the subplot as making possible “to demonstrate the full spectrum of possible reactions to

trauma” (82), however, I find in the background the resistance (anomie) of the narrative to its own ordering principle (*nomos*), simultaneously internal to and external to the central narrative structure. In this sense, the differences in the critical observations point to the simultaneity of the subplot’s interiority and exteriority with regard to the main plotline, as well as to its decentralizing or disordering operation. The way in which the subnarrative participates in the ordering structure of the novel becomes evident in the sequentiality of the narrative voices. Versluys notes that “three narratives alternate in an unchanging sequence: Oskar-Grandpa-Oskar-Grandma,” a cycle that the novel completes four times, ending with Oskar’s voice (80). Critical work on the figures of Oskar’s grandparents (and frequently on all characters in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*) tends to examine them through the lens of trauma.³ But this article takes the discussion in a somewhat different direction. All three voices, which Versluys dubs “crackpot” (81), arrive distorted—Oskar’s anomalously precocious, the grandmother’s often crackling through the walkie-talkie she and Oskar use to communicate across the space between their building, and the grandfather’s soundless, operating without the cadences that sound affords, yet of a turbulent and multipliciously inflected silence.

The correspondence of the grandparents—fragmented, performative, and vertiginous—composed of letters, notes, blank pages, and silences is directed not only to each other but also from Thomas Shell to his child (Oscar’s father) and from the grandmother (who remains nameless) to Oscar himself. It is their relationship and particularly Thomas Shell’s lapse into

³Thomas Thieke asserts that both grandparents suffer from PTSD to which each of their ailments—the grandfather’s aphonia and the grandmother’s agoraphobia, while Stephanie Pabst directly describes Thomas Schell as someone “who had lost his language as a consequence of his trauma” (32). Later on, she distinguishes between spoken and written language, pointing to the grandfather’s eloquence with regard to the latter. Similarly, Nathelie Gerlach contends that Schell Sr. is doubly traumatized, both by “the Dresden Bombing and the loss of his son in the 9/11 attacks” (25).

muteness that is of focal interest to this paper. Describing his loss of the ability to speak and just before he tattoos “yes” and “no” on his left and right palm respectively, Thomas Shell notes: “I was the last word I was able to speak aloud” (17), “silence overtook me like a cancer” (16). Etymologically anomie inheres even in this movement of overtaking, as indicated by the phrase ἐνέμετο πρόσω (enemeto prosō) (3.133) in *The Histories* of Herodotus, a cognate of νέμω (nemo), meaning the spreading of cancerous sores. To examine “the anomie of silence,” as the subsequent sections of this article do, is, then, to offer a conception of silence not only as muteness (ἡμωτα) that arises as other from the self and as wandering and displacement. It is also to conceptualize a silence that, as a state of exception, constitutes an anomalous activity that transforms the body it inhabits into a liminal space or interval between the sound and soundlessness of utter annihilation, of a foreign tongue while it still poses a struggle; of writing and especially of a writing that cannot be written or cannot be read even when written.

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