theories and methodologies

Jennifer Egan's Dive for the Inarticulate

JOHN FABIAN WITT

Trying to use words, and every attempt
Is a wholly new start, and a different kind of failure
Because one has only learnt to get the better of words
For the thing one no longer has to say, or the way in which
One is no longer disposed to say it. And so each venture
Is a new beginning, a raid on the inarticulate
With shabby equipment always deteriorating. . . .
—T. S. Eliot, "East Coker," part 2 of *Four Quartets* (1940)

FORTY YEARS AGO, THE POET AND LITERARY CRITIC WILLIAM HARMON DISTINGUISHED BETWEEN TWO WAYS IN WHICH LANGUAGE CAN FAIL. Writing in these pages, Harmon observed that speechlessness and silences can be markers of frustration, incapacity, and failed connections. Think of the disjointed language of William Faulkner's Benjy Compson in *The Sound and the Fury* or, more recently, the silences of the ghostly character Given who haunts Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing.* Alternatively, spaces beyond the horizons of language can embody a tranquility so thorough and full of meaning that words would mar the perfection of the moment. In this second sense, inarticulateness is a point of peace and stillness toward which language is at best a clumsy passage. Harmon contended that in the twenty years between the world wars the poetry of T. S. Eliot shifted from the first sense of inarticulateness to the second (450).

Early readings of Jennifer Egan's *Manhattan Beach* have focused on the book's rendering of New York and its history, on its reconstruction of the city's waterfront, on its depiction of women in the wartime culture of the 1940s, and on the significance of water and the ocean in the economy of the novel. The novel floats over each of these subjects at length, to be sure. But as I read the book, Egan's novel also steers a route from the first of Harmon's two senses of inarticulateness to the second. The novel's genius is to conjure a world with enough depth and meaning that the reader slides past the cacophony of language's failures to feel the peace that sometimes arrives when language recedes. Harmon calls this "the ideal condition

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of peaceful stillness" (458). Eliot achieved such peace through decades of what Harmon (drawing on Eliot) called "raids on the inarticulate" (450). In *Manhattan Beach* Egan reaches a place of peaceful stillness, too. But she gets there in a different way. Egan doesn't raid. She dives.

Inarticulateness as Frustration

In Egan's text, the profoundly disabled Lydia, sister of the novel's protagonist, Anna Kerrigan, is the first embodiment of the torments that arise out of failures of language. A few years younger than the precociously articulate twelve-year-old Anna, Lydia is an invalid in a prolonged infancy that stretches well into what should be her elementary school years. Her diaper needs to be changed, her hair washed, and her body bathed. A neighborhood boy carries her up and down the stairs. Lydia is beautiful—more beautiful, the reader learns, than her sister, Anna. But she is virtually unable to communicate with the world, and what little ability she has to make herself understood diminishes as she grows older. Her language is a "senseless babble—echolalia, the doctors called it" (15). She can only repeat syllables she hears, with little rhyme or reason. And this "babbling, nonsensical form" of speech has real disruptive effects (108). Most of all, it undoes Lydia's father, Eddie, who is overcome with guilt for his fantasies of her death. (Would it have been better, he wonders, if she had not survived childbirth at all [267]?) Eddie cannot integrate Lydia's condition into a coherent story of his own life. Her condition also disrupts Eddie's marriage to Agnes, a former dancer. Around Lydia, the two lovers have lost their step.

Lydia's inarticulateness causes her pain, too. At a Catholic mass when Lydia is three years old, she begins to make "a strangled sound . . . louder and more wrenching than seem[s] possible in a baby," a sound so loud it threatens to drown out the mass (265). Later, when Lydia dies, her mother howls like an animal (174). What else is there left to do to mark the death of someone who could not herself speak?

Lydia's condition is not the only trauma that renders people speechless. After a shipwreck late in the novel, a group of seamen are attacked by sharks as they float defenseless in the water. A formerly irrepressible member of the crew is rendered mute by the unspeakable horror of the episode. "What kind of terror," Eddie wonders, must it have taken "to silence such a man" (372)?

Difficulties in speech are of course a perennial subject, perhaps in high modernist literature most of all: Samuel Beckett, Eliot, Martin Heidegger, Tom Stoppard, and Ludwig Wittgenstein are just a few of many prominent practitioners and theorists of the limits of language. James Joyce's Stephen Dedalus may be the most famous example of the general problem: the man who cannot escape the resonances and accretions of past meanings, no matter how brilliant his efforts to remake language are.

But to me, the inarticulateness of Egan's Lydia carries special poignancy. This disabled female figure, recessive in the plot, is the moral center of the story. Her echolalic speech—"See the sea the sea the sea the sea" (118)—carries with it the promise of something more than nonsense. Repeating things turns out to be a form of talking, too; as Anna says, "That's talking, isn't it?" (154).

Inarticulateness as Peace

The currents of *Manhattan Beach* turn out to have riptides and countercurrents. Lydia is not merely a disintegrating figure, unable to say what she thinks. She seems to have an inner peace. Sometimes Anna thinks Lydia sees and hears and understands. And at times the younger sister's body communicates a tranquility. Lowered into the water of her bath, Lydia's coiled and bent form relaxes and luxuriates. Her blue eyes seem to hold a

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secret wisdom, an inner knowledge just out of our reach. It's as if she vibrates to an invisible electric current, a radio "tuned to a distant frequency" (118).

Lydia isn't the only reason to think that peace comes with the end of language. Sex is a speechless space in the novel, a space that transports its participants, whether they are the teenage Anna and a neighborhood boy quietly coupling in a squalid basement (119–21) or a young society couple meeting in the bathroom for an impromptu assignation at a formal party (134–35). At least sometimes, talk is merely a pale shadow of experience. Trapped on a raft at sea, the shipwrecked seamen "talked about food in the florid detail with which protectory boys had talked about sex, and for the same reason: talk was all they had" (389). Or consider Eddie Kerrigan and his erstwhile nemesis, the bosun, alone on the raft after its other passengers are lost to the sea. Eventually, they no longer speak, but that's because they have reached a higher plane of intimacy and communication: "For long spells they lay side by side, gazing into each other's eyes. It was too late for stories." Eddie and the bosun have "left language behind" (397). And as death seems to approach, Eddie finds that he too can no longer speak (398).

Most of all, as death looms for Eddie, the sounds Lydia made surge back into his consciousness. He remembers the "light, wafting sound" of "a bubbling, giddy rush" (398), not "sentences so much as waves" (399). Lydia's experience beyond language becomes in that moment "the truth that underlay all the rest," the integrating foundation of all that offers peace to Eddie at the end: "Papa Anna run Mama see the sea Mama clap Anna see the sea Papa kiss Anna run to see the sea the sea the sea the sea the sea theseatheseatheseatheseathesea" (399).

Inarticulateness and the Sea

Herein, I think, lies the secret power of oceans and diving in *Manhattan Beach*. The ocean figures as a space beyond language—sometimes, at least. Recall the receding waves in Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels's thought experiment of nearly four decades ago. Were the waves by happenstance to leave marks etched in the sand that reproduced a Wordsworth poem, the marks would not really be language or even words at all. They would be accidents (Knapp and Michaels 727–28). Egan's waves work the same strange wordless magic on the beaches of Jamaica Bay. The tides bring experience, not language. They deliver peace and death. They can be ecstatic and life-creating, or dangerous and deadly. Eddie nearly dies in the ocean more than once—though it also saves his life by offering a watery escape from the mafia. The sea soothes Lydia with its monotones and its lyrical repetitions, yet the experience seems to accelerate her decline. Its depths offer Anna a path to achievement alongside the male divers. It nearly kills her, too.

Eliot's engagement with inarticulateness in "East Coker" comes in the martial form of "a raid on the inarticulate." Eliot aimed to go over the top of the trench and defeat the limits of language, to come off the battlefield having won his skirmishes with meaning. At the very least he reflected ironically on the difficulty of doing so.

Egan's tack is very different. Her text does not raid the inarticulate; it dives for the inarticulate. We swim into New York Harbor in search of the experience and the meaning that lie beneath a jumble of words and signs and texts. Our dives are inevitably clumsy and encumbered, to be sure. Anna dives in the heavy suit that protects its wearers from the dangers of the depths. Eddie plunges into the water in chains meant to drown him. Lydia's metaphoric dives are bound in language, too, for traces of words and phrases shape her trancelike state just as they shape the other characters' realities. Lydia remakes words even as she is bound to repeat them.

And yet despite the encumbrances, Egan's characters (even the mobster Dexter

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Styles at the end of his life) seem to find in the silences of the sea something close to an unmediated tranquility. The novel's thrilling promise is to use words—and in particular to use Lydia's approximation of words—to deliver something approaching that peace to its readers.

I am a historian of the law by training and occupation, not a literary critic or scholar of literature. This may be all too apparent to the readers of this journal! Indeed, my only real qualification to write about Egan's text in such an august venue may be my considerable fishing experience off the rocks by Kingsborough Community College in the actual Manhattan Beach. Perhaps I too have been searching for some kind of experience beyond language in the striped bass and the false albacore lurking below the surface. Reading the words of fishing writers on the subject, even the brilliant Peter Kaminsky, is a pale shadow of pursuing the bass themselves!

In my roles as scholar and teacher I have found the theory of language, its power, and its limits extraordinarily useful. Elaine Scarry's account of words and the body in *The Body in Pain* (1985) and her suggestion that pain defeats language helped shape my first book. In the law, after all, pain forms entire fields of legal practice, with accompanying profusions of language. (What else does the personal-injury lawyer do but tell stories about pain?!)[1] Michel Foucault's famous thesis on the production of unfreedom through the production of language has informed my work as well. The language of the law, like language generally, carries power. At the same time, the promise of escaping language into unmediated experience offers (Maybe! Just maybe!) a space of freedom outside the law.

Of course, a novel would be an odd place to find such an escape from words. And to be sure there is no escape, especially not in a text that is at least partly about what lies in the depths after language. Egan's ingeniously crafted ending captures the dilemma. Words go out to greet the fog as it comes in over the sea once more. What will happen when they meet?

Note

1. Witt, *Accidental Republic*; see also Witt, *Patriots* 211–78 and "Political Economy."

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