

## To The Speech Clinic

All stutterers are alike. They suffer from *strabismus* and sinistrality, from humoral distemper and spasms of the glottis, from the black shake of *petit mal* and the heartbreak of dysphemia. Their Humor is of the Earth, cold and dry, and their organ is the spleen. Their Temperament is Nervous. Their Faculties are Confused. Disorder rules their Discourse. They desire to speak well, but they are daunted by the fear of speaking ill.

Stutterers are constantly in this dither. They approach and avoid. They hesitate. Some wear devices: elastic neck bands, ear pieces, articulatory tubes, mouth disks. Personal and possessive pronouns are hard to declare, but those relative and demonstrative are not. Consonants are killers. Vowels come easily.

There are potions for stuttering. Hieronymus Mercurialis recommends, in 1583, a rinse of mother's milk and a wetpress for the tongue. The solution consists of water of mallows, oil of sweet almonds, and the leaves of water lily. In *Sylva Sylvarum* (1627), Francis Bacon writes: "The Cause may bee, (in most,) the Refrigeration of the Tongue; Whereby it is lesse apt to move, And therefore wee see in those that Stut, if they drinke Wine moderately, They Stut, less, because it heateth; And so we see, that they that Stut, doe Stut more in the first offer to speake, than in Continuance; Because the Tongue is, by Motion, somewhat heated." In Finland, below Oulu, stuttering Finns prefer, and still use, *Hirven Sarven Tippoja*, Elk-horn drops.

Stutterers are anal-sadistic, torn between love and hatred, between sucking and biting, and therefore also manic-depressive, broken on the wheel. Women who stutter, their rebellious tongue is a false penis hammered against the dental gate. "No use," the stutterer cries out in the solitude of misery, "it is no use."

It is not what is to be said that makes the stutterer hesitate, but that it must be said. The hard *c* that will not come to start *confiteor* on its way to *Dei* also keeps the moocow up the road, mooing. At some moment in the stutterer's early life there must be a question, a question so powerful that it is forgotten, because all that is remembered is the circumstance. I

am obliged to speak. "Where art thou, Adam?" The cab-driver says: "Where to?"

To the Speech Clinic.

Demosthenes stood upon the Aegean strand, with pebbles in his mouth, shouting out fine speeches above the uproar of the sea. Demosthenes stood before a mirror, with pebbles in his mouth, declaiming. Demosthenes ran up steep hills wearing heavy weights strapped to his chest. His clinician, Satyrus, had a theory, a system, a regime. Isaeus, Dean of the School of Rhetoric in Athens, referred Demosthenes to Satyrus. Who was Demosthenes? One of us. A fatherless child, abused by his guardians, a stutterer. At 21, he took an abusive guardian, Aphobus, to court, painfully argued his case, and got a conviction. He hated tyranny, hated the Macedonian tyrant, Philip, denounced him in three famous speeches called the *Philippics*.

In Reception there is a bust of Satyrus. On the wall, portraits of the modern European master clinicians: Serre d'Alais, Malebouche, Ssikorski, Wyneken, Colombat de l'Isere in his laboratory inventing the muthonome, and portraits of the American master clinicians: Sheehan and Van Riper, Travis and Johnson, looking very Rotarian. In the waiting room, on a table, much-handled, greasy from use, Gutzmann's *Das Stottern*, Bryngelson's *Nervous Child*.

"Where art thou, Adam?"

An impalpable commotion of slight breeze and immense force. Everything trembles. Here and there a golden apple falls, tearing through the leaves, thumping to the ground. All the creatures stand, attentive, astonished by the change, by the sudden chill in the air, by the inexplicable sensation of change. Thought forces itself through the mind of the beasts: What happened? That is the question. This is the change. Everything has moved, without warning, without any sense of break, from sweetest peace, from simple contemplation, to question. The grass is still green.

"Where art thou, Adam?"

Consider the great welling impulse of the vocal tonus, Adam's suck of air, spread of rib, inflation, tightening of muscles. Upstairs, in the striapallidum,

where the executive order is given, some neural clerk obediently chooses *le mot juste* from the Inventory, which being done, this word is sent to the vocal cords where outgoing breath plays upon it, sounds it, gives it over to the Archimedean machinery of jaw, tongue, cheeks, lips, to shape and stress into distinct speech utterance.

“The initial phonemic posture is produced, scanned, and found dangerous,” the clinician continues, “and so the stutterer recoils and struggles. This struggling merely increases the firmness of the closures, the tenseness of the constrictions and the sensations of increasing air pressure. Thus, the cues become more vivid and dangerous, and cyclic self-reinforcement takes place.”

“Where art thou, Adam?”

In the Speech Clinic, avoid the surgeons, Drs. Dieffenbach and Braid, tongue and tonsil clippers.

God waits for Adam’s response. Every creature in Eden is aware of this instance, Adam’s intake of air, God waiting for Adam’s response. Not called upon to speak, Eve gazes imploringly at Adam, fearfully trusting in his eloquence. Let him find some way to begin that will break this terrible tension, she prays, as Adam, lungs tight, lips parted, hesitates. Some genius piece of humor, she hopes, that will relax everyone, everything. Then let him make the case. Let it be well argued, a serious reasoned presentation. Let Adam get stronger and stronger as he speaks. She needs him just this once, to be great.

“Where art thou, Adam?”

There is such malice in the question, such contemptuous irony. The vocal cords in Adam’s throat convulse, constrict. His palms sweat. His immediate vision blurs. Adam’s only case is against God, impugns God, implicates God. He knows this, the hopelessness of it, Eve all the while beseeching him with her pleading eyes, to plead, to plead. In the cool of the evening, God waits for Adam’s response. He is interested to see what Adam will say.

And then it comes, what a surprise, Adam speaks. How strong is Adam’s response, direct, without special pleading, his self-revelation, the truth of his feeling. “I heard thy voice in paradise and I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself.” Every creature in Eden takes it in, Adam’s response, thinks it over. Afraid, naked, hid. Eve thinks, wrong, wrong, wrong.

In the cool of the evening, Himself somewhat

surprised, God ponders Adam’s response. It isn’t so much what Adam says, God already knows it, but how he says it, his clear strong voice speaking without hesitation, precise in pronunciation, flawless in timbre, this is what nettles God. He detects in it some measure of effrontery, a kind of attitude. Like an aroused Supreme Court Justice, God pursues. “And who hath told thee that thou wast naked, but that thou hast eaten of the tree whereof I commanded thee that thou shouldst not eat?”

Adam does not stutter. He gets stronger. He makes his case. If God is going to do causation, Adam will do causation. He answers: “The woman, whom thou gavest me to be my companion, gave me of the tree, and I did eat.” What a great moment for free speech. Truth is told to Majesty, who has rigged every argument, and once told, spoken aloud, perfectly, there it is. God is responsible for everything that happens, a problem God has ever since struggled with, trying to formulate a response that is not merely the bluster of tyranny.

“Brace yourself, and stand up like a man,” He’ll typically say. “I will ask questions, and you shall answer. Where were you when I laid the earth’s foundation?”

To which, in time, Job: “I lay my hand on my mouth.”

Everywhere, after the Tower’s toppling, stutters in new and different exertions, in Hausa: *i’ina*, in Carvichan: *sutsuts*, in Tabiyang: *ngak-ngak*, in Nepalese: *bha-ka-u-nu*, in hieroglyphic Egyptian: *nitit*. Everywhere, clinics, therapies.

Moses stutters, and God refuses to take responsibility for it. Indeed the Speechgiver seems baffled by the problem. What stutterer does not know this story, how Moses on Mount Horeb interrupted the stentorian magnificence of God’s dictation to decline his ordination as God’s messenger to Pharaoh. Because he stuttered, Moses said, he would prefer not to. God is well along in his dictation, do this, do that, Moses is to announce him to the Israelites, explain the new program to the Elders, speak before the King of Egypt, when Moses protests that he is terrified of public speaking, that he stutters. “O, Lord, I have never been a man of ready speech, never in my life, not even now that thou has spoken to me; I am slow and hesitant of speech.”

God is dumbfounded, speechless. He has just

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explained a complicated set of magical tricks involving a staff, a cloak, and a glass of Nile water, and he now sees that Moses has not been paying attention, that Moses has been thinking about his speech impediment, imagining himself before the Elders, before the Egyptian king. It mightily vexes God that Moses should fear stuttering more than he trusted God.

“Who is it that gives man speech?” the Speechgiver demands, struck by this unexpected resistance, and then He flies into a fit of pique. It is this causation thing again. *Because, in creation, you flawed me, I can't do this.* The Speechgiver sounds very much like the Majesty who lectured Job with his mailed fist in that other earlier hard place of judgement. He demands of Moses: “Who makes him dumb and deaf? Who makes him clear-sighted or blind? Is it not I, the Lord?” But God does not then simply touch Moses's vocalizing apparatus and make it eloquent. He doesn't just irradiate Moses with electric self-confidence. Go, God says, and I will help you, I'll tell you what to say—not really understanding that such a promise would only intensify Moses's dread of public speaking. Moses will not take the assignment. God should choose some better person: “send the message by whomever thou wilt.”

Moses's interposition of his impediment halts the flow of divine dictation. Everything stops, the course of human history, as God must turn to deal with this interruptive, seemingly untreatable, perverse human malady. So thunderous with potent law, so big with commandment, God is made to argue the small point, and lose the argument. Even with divine inspiration, Moses would have to speak before the Elders, before the King, Moses would have to do the talking, so of course he still won't do it. Divine inspiration only ups the stakes, increases the pressure of must say. It isn't what is to be said; it is that it must be said.

Exasperated, God glances about. Here is Aaron, coming along the way. “He speaks fluently.” He will do the public speaking. “And you are to speak to him and put the words in his mouth; and I, even I, will be with your mouth and his mouth, and I will teach you what you are to do.”

Not an auspicious moment in the history of speech therapy, but a strangely great one for stutterers. In the hard place of must say, where Adam had

to speak, Moses will not say. Instead he places God before stuttering, places God before the human, this flaw in Mosaic speech, catches him in causation. If they are to go on speaking, and human history is to move once more, they must speak around Moses's impediment. God will say to Moses, Moses to Aaron, Aaron to the Israelites, to the Elders, to the King of Egypt. Even after the First and Second Encounter with Pharaoh, after momentous scenes in the palace, great events in the land, still Moses insists, Moses reminds God: “Behold, I am unskilled in speech; how then will Pharaoh listen to me?”

Wearily, now without indignation, without pique, God simply goes around it, this nutty Mosaic obstinacy, ignores it, as it were, to get back to the urgent business at hand, what must be done, what must be said. “You shall speak all that I command you, and your brother Aaron shall speak to Pharaoh that he let the sons of Israel go out of his land.” Isn't there here, under the sign of Moses's speech impediment, in the brief intersentential space of God's tacit acceptance of Moses's refusal and reason, a sort of exacted quid-pro-quo, an odd little triumph for human disability? Moses is eighty as he presses the case of his speech impediment.

In 1959, at a speech clinic, I sat silently at a long table with ten other silent young men, stutterers all. It was our first meeting, and we were waiting for the therapist to appear. No one spoke. Then she came into the room, an attractive young woman, Jewish, a kind of Elaine May, big horn-rimmed glasses, hair pulled back, no makeup. She sat, introduced herself, briefly explained the course of therapy, and then asked us to introduce ourselves, one by one, to the group, going down and around the table. We were to say our name and tell something about us. I had come in late, sat directly to her left, and was therefore the last person to speak in this sequence. She wanted us all to commit to speaking. No one was to sit silently in these sessions.

I am obliged to speak. Telephones ring. The cab-driver says: “Where to?” An eminent guest, newly arrived, turns, smiling, to be introduced. I rise in the classroom (I am twelve, I am twenty four), I scan the bristling lines I am to recite. Unspeakable consonants crouch in every sentence. A wily unforeseen fricative suddenly shows itself. There is a plosive,

surely a problem. Speech stopped reveals the animality of utterance. Here is a contortion of visage, bulging eyes, glistening brow, distended neck muscles, the whole head jerking, swaying, at the work of delivering speech. Others will wait patiently in the angelic humanity of their fluency, their ease of speech, for you to get through what it is you are trying to say, and you will get through it, miserably, fall silent at last, exhausted.

It took almost the whole hour for these ten stutterers to introduce themselves and make a statement. There were honkers and hissers, grunters and moaners, bob and weavers, table thumpers. We went through the entire repertoire of tonic seizure. We were everybody, from different classes, different communities, two of us incredibly handsome, Billy Budds, one Billy Budd the worst, who had the longest struggle, truly a thing to endure, a Polish name that had seemingly no end.

At last it came to me. Everyone looked at me. What next? I spoke my name perfectly in a deep assured bass voice; I said my name as Walter Cronkite said his name on the nightly news. Resonantly, fairly burbling in fruity mellowness, I told them I was an English major, that I was going to graduate school and was deeply worried about having to give seminar reports. I didn't apologize for not stuttering. I said my piece, and then the therapist, making no reference to me, gave us a brief assignment, a speech exercise, and excused us. We had all spoken, on demand, and my flawless speech, so it seemed, was just another kind of stuttering. It is, in a sense, the worst kind, intermittent situational stuttering. Here you are, sailing along, everyone attentive, then, incredibly, here is waver word, a killer consonant, and there it is, to everyone's surprise, you stutter.

I never did stutter at the Speech Clinic. As soon as I stepped through the door, a great calm came over me. I felt at once perfectly relaxed and strongly poised. The Speech Clinic was in a pleasing old mansion, had Persian rugs, potted plants, and paintings, Vivaldi or Bach softly playing. The receptionist, an attractive young woman, stuttered. Elaine May was my therapist. I did sessions in group and alone with Elaine, was word perfect every instance, effortlessly meeting each speech demand with prompt crisp enunciation, desperate with it, finally, shaking my head, shrugging, as words poured from my lips,

everything well said and deeply voiced. After several such sessions, I was let go, referred to another therapy, another therapist, a hypno-therapist, but there wasn't any time for it, I was leaving Wisconsin, off to graduate school in California, so I took my stuttering with me.

At Stanford, one night, I did not go to read my paper in the graduate seminar. It was my best paper, a reading of Isaac Babel's *Red Cavalry*. A Russian Jew, a Bolshevik journalist, a brilliant stylist, a minimalist, Babel rode with an anti-Semitic Cossack cavalry against the Poles in the nineteen twenties. His story, "My First Goose," had knocked me over, it was so perfectly put, and I had written, as a tribute, a tight little essay on Babel that had itself one or two bone-bare well-saids. Irving Howe was the professor. I sent my regrets through the department secretary: I was ill; my paper, actually finished, was in his mailbox. I was desolate that night, the awfulness of which is still bitter in my mouth.

Next week, just before class, stutterer's luck, Professor Howe called me into his office. He liked my paper. He wanted me to read it. In a clutter of statement, already going into tonic seizure, I said, clearly enough: "I'd prefer not to." It seemed oddly to amuse him. He said, if I didn't mind, he'd read my paper to the class. What could I say? I couldn't say: I'm content, I missed my chance, let's just go on to the next paper. In class he used my phrase humorously as he explained why he was reading my paper: "Neil said he would prefer not to." The class was also amused by my phrase. Persons exchanged glances. Persons grimaced at me. I was, at that very moment, revolving in my thought, what it was about my phrase that was so humorous.

I was in my first semester in graduate school. I hadn't got that deep in Melville, I didn't know that this was Bartleby's famous saying, that "Bartleby, The Scrivener," was Melville's best short story, that Bartleby himself, *par excellence*, was the person drawing himself into silence, shutting down, inward turning, face to the wall.

At Stanford I put wax plugs in my ears. I might now pop a Valium. There is no end to stuttering.

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