English Studies in Canada

The Child's Stuttering Mouth and the Ruination of Language in Jordan Scott's blert and Shelley Jackson's Riddance

Daniel Martin

Volume 46, Number 2-3-4, June–September–December 2020

New Sonic Approaches in Literary Studies

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1111324ar
DOI: https://doi.org/10.1353/esc.2020.a903553

See table of contents

Publisher(s)

Association of Canadian College and University Teachers of English (ACCUTE)

ISSN

0317-0802 (print)
1913-4835 (digital)

Cite this article

Martin, D. (2020). The Child's Stuttering Mouth and the Ruination of Language in Jordan Scott's blert and Shelley Jackson's Riddance. *English Studies in Canada*, *46*(2-3-4), 215–233. https://doi.org/10.1353/esc.2020.a903553

The Child's Stuttering Mouth and the Ruination of Language in Jordan Scott's *blert* and Shelley Jackson's *Riddance*

Daniel Martin
MacEwan University

In recent years, the interdisciplinary field that Chris Eagle has called "Dysfluency Studies" ("Introduction" 4) has questioned cultural expressions of speech disorders that rely on stuttering or stammering as a metaphor for other mental, aesthetic, political, and affective problems.[1] Literary, cultural, and critical expressions of stutters and stammers (some literal, others metaphorical) are notoriously difficult to contextualize because they pop up everywhere in our writing. We desperately want to make the world and its language systems stutter for various aesthetic and political reasons. Echoing the foundational work of disability scholars David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder on the concepts of narrative prosthesis, Eagle writes that "without exception in modern literature, speech pathologies are 'diagnosed' metaphorically as the symptom of some character flaw such as excessive nervousness or weakness, or treated as a symbol for the general tendency of language toward communicative breakdown, ambiguity, polysemy, misunderstanding, etc." (*Dysfluencies* 11–12). Eagle's extensive study of the "neurolinguistic turn" in modern fiction by authors such as Herman Melville, Emile Zola, James Joyce, Robert Graves, James Joyce, Philip Roth, Gail Jones, Jonathan Lethem, and David Mitchell, among others, fills a gap in

1 For an account of the rise of Dysfluency Studies, see Maria Stuart.

ESC 46.2–4 (June/September/December 2020 [Published May 2023]): 215–233

literary analysis of speech dysfluencies left by Marc Shell's *Stutter*, which explores the aesthetic qualities of speech dysfluencies in literature and popular culture. Shell and Eagle's studies respectively advocate for better cultural representations of people who stutter and challenge powerful biomedical beliefs that dysfluent voices are by default in need of correction or cure. At the same time, the interdisciplinary field of Dysfluency Studies that Shell and Eagle have inaugurated recognizes the stutter or stammer as an embodied expression of linguistic and communicative diversity and challenges the normative time frames that govern our collective desires for vocal fluency.[2]

For my purposes in this essay on the stuttering child's mouth in Jordan Scott's poetic text *blert* and Shelley Jackson's novel *Riddance: The Sybil Joines Vocational School for Ghost Speakers & Hearing-Mouth Children*, what interests me is Eagle's warning about the three "pitfalls" of metaphorization, stigmatization, and glorification (*Dysfluencies* 162) in current theoretical appropriations of the stutter in language systems. How do we read and write about literary representations of stuttered speech through other means? One approach is to reframe representations of stuttering characters as heroic figures (Johnson), in contrast to conventional representations of weak, pathetic, or comedic stutterers and stammerers. Such an argument stemming from disability studies tends to rely exclusively on representational processes. Another approach coalesces in the philosophical approaches to language of Gilles Deleuze and Michel de Certeau, who have romanticized dysfluent speech as an "idealized state of language" (*Dysfluencies* 160). In this dominant theoretical approach, creative expressions of language are at their best when they are on the verge of breakdown and rupture. Deleuze's influential essay "He Stuttered" is especially indicative of this romanticization in its argument that good writers know how to make the entire language system tremble and glitch; modern writers such as Melville and Beckett produce "an affective and intensive language, and no longer an affectation of the one who speaks" (108). For Eagle, this theoretical approach that privileges writing that makes language itself stutter is potentially provocative, but it also ignores the lived experiences of people who stutter (*Dysfluencies* 160). One of the problems of Deleuze's influence in the interdisciplinary field of voice studies is precisely this romanticization of the stutter in all our linguistic experiences. Language overwhelms us all. We all stutter. The great works of literature become "phonotexts" (Stewart) that resist played out deconstructive analyses of the

2 See St Pierre's *Cheap Talk* for a provocative examination of the temporal demands of fluency in the age of late capitalism.

Daniel Martin is an Associate Professor in the Department of English at MacEwan University. He has published essays and book chapters on speech, voice, and dysfluency in the *Journal of Interdisciplinary Voice Studies*, *A Cultural History of Disability in the Long Nineteenth Century* (Bloomsbury), *Victorian Review*, and the *Canadian Journal of Disability Studies*.

printed voice but that still position the literary text as a "sounding-board" (Stewart 3) for the reading body. Stuttering becomes an effect of the ludic playfulness of language as it works its way through what Roshaya Rodness calls the "dark channel between the mind and the lips" (198). But, if this is the case, how do we read and write about the enigmatic experiences of people who actually stutter without succumbing to metaphor, stigma, or valorization of the creative stuttering inherent in all textuality?

I think we just do it. We put aside our critical methodologies that expose the tensions between voice and text in literary expression and imagine the experiences of children who stutter through powerful fantasies of language devourment and ruination. Despite their differences in genre (one a celebrated work of Canadian sound poetry, the other an experimental text by an innovator in the rise of hypertext or found-document fiction), both *blert* and *Riddance* reimagine stuttered speech outside of the prosaic deconstruction of voice/text, presence/absence, fluent/dysfluent that has informed so much of critical study of the voice in literary texts. Both examine what it means to return, in Scott's words, to "the fact of the mouth" (7). These are texts that do not simply romanticize the stutter inherent in all language systems. Nor do they playfully deconstruct the critical binaries of speech/text, presence/absence, and phonemic/phonetic that inform most accounts of the voice in literature. As textual expressions of dysfluent vocality, they certainly do such deconstruction, at least many critical approaches in literary voice studies will persist in saying so. Our critical and theoretical methodologies have grounded our study of literary voices in such binaries, but there are other ways of reimagining our critical romanticization of communicative breakdowns. More provocatively, Scott and Jackson both reorient readers' responses away from a logic of extractive *meaning* toward an invitation to participate in the child-like pleasures of devouring, ingesting, and ruining language, and the accompanying traumas, aches, and longings that are inevitable in such pleasure. They experiment with playful accounts of the various devices, techniques, and tricks that modern speech experts have introduced under the auspices of cure. Both raise profound questions about the history of speech-language therapy and the extensive cultural history of the stutter as a haunted and haunting presence—both irremediably internal and external to the speaking mouth.

Fundamentally, both understand the act of reading fluently as something other than triumph for people who stutter. Reading evokes a threat in the relationship between speaker and language. The stutter is a threat of undoing. It creates a hole that swallows up even the binary distinctions

that critics and theorists hold on to in the search for meaning. Sometimes that hole becomes a portal to other dimensions and voices. Other times it's just a giant mouth ingesting language and destroying meaning, enigmatically threatening everything like a child's gleeful indulgences. As Zali Gurevitch argues, speech, especially when it stutters, "plays the meaning game at the chasm, proceeds from interruption, proposing knowledge at the very break of knowledge" (525). These are texts that introduce a sense of joy and jubilation in the actual embodied experience of the stutter's ruinous relationship to language.

Language systems are the host; we are the parasites.

The fact of the mouth

Scott's *blert* is a poetic text that stutters in its own contemplations of dysfluent speech. It mixes poetic lines, catalogues of words, extracts from other texts (both acknowledged and unacknowledged), prose fiction, and prose non-fiction. It is a text *about* stuttered speech, but it also challenges normative assumptions about voice, text, performance, and dysfluency. Acceptance of vocal diversity does not seem to be central to its sonic textualities. Scott imagines a relationship between voice and text that defies simplistic deconstruction of presence and absence regarding the origins of voice, but I don't agree with Craig Dworkin's claim that *blert* enacts the stutter as "not an affect registered *in* language but rather an effect *of* language" (180). Such a Deleuzian reading seems to miss Scott's deliberate playfulness concerning the experiences of people who actually stutter. Scott's dedication—"For those who do"—suggests that *blert* is a text about the desires and experiences of people who stutter. This reference to a community of people who stutter informs the text's preface "On Avoidance," which begins in the autobiographical mode. Scott writes that "It is part of my existence to be the parasite of metaphors, so easily am I carried away by the first simile that comes along. Having been carried away, I have to find my difficult way back, and slowly return, to the fact of my mouth" (7).

In these opening remarks, *blert* insists that what follows in the text is something more complicated than the affect/effect distinction that informs much of voice/sound studies (Deleuze, Stewart). Metaphors and language are not just a symbolic system that we learn and that conditions the very core of our subjectivity and how we talk and write about ourselves. Language systems are the host; we are the parasites (but only partially) who feed on and devour words. Communication is not some rational emancipatory process that will set us free from the wildness and the garbled violence of miscommunication or dysfluency. But, as Scott

suggests, we might at times need to find our way back to our mouths. But whose mouths? Who is reading? Who is speaking?

Resolving the complexities of such questions is a process of slow return. Slowness emerges in *blert* through references to the poetics of recitation but also through repeated references to eating, ingesting, devouring, and regurgitating. The text also repeatedly relies on scientific terminology pertaining to skeletal structures of various animals such as birds and whales, glacial patterns, and geological timeframes, each materially representing an expression of blocked or rigid communication. The language of geological and skeletal deep-time accords with the many metaphors and analogies that people who stutter often associate with stuttered speech, the iceberg being the most celebrated of analogies in speech clinics in the Western world.[3]

For Scott, this fusion of devourment and language production takes on especially compelling forms through references to the language desires of children who stutter. In the book's concluding "Author's Note," Scott deliberately challenges scholarship in voice studies and especially its iterations in literary analysis and poetics, writing that *blert* is "a text written to be as difficult as possibly for me to read" (64). Readers need only try to recite sections of *blert* such as its various short "Chomp Sets," to experience a sense of the challenge Scott has set out for himself:

> Coca-Cola tonic krill
> gill baleen
> dream wrenched
> Kleenex smack
> Baltic Pyrex
> Megahertz humpback
> Kickback: flex
> nukes flub
> blubber sexy
> plankton number (37)

Such difficult or unruly words are not tongue twisters in any childish sense that need mastering by a skilled public reader. Emphasizing that the "stutterer's interaction with language is remarkably different from that of persons who don't stutter" (64), Scott writes in his concluding note of his own poetic process that "the stutter here appears on its own terms, rejecting the metaphoric, thematic, graphic (a-a-a-a) or representational aspects

3 For the origins of the concept of the stuttering iceberg, see Sheehan.

of this language disturbance. The text is written as if my own gibbering mouth chomped upon the language system, then regurgitated the cud of difference" (65). Moreover, "*blert* is written as a threat to coherence, as a child's thick desire to revamp the alphabet, as an inchoate moan edging toward song" (65).

His poetics are neither completely phonetic nor phonemic, to borrow Stewart's terms. Instead, Scott's carefully selected words on each page leave it up to the reader to find meaning in their patterns and definitions. Fundamentally, what matters to Scott is the level of oral difficulty in his selection of words, as evidenced by the text's three different iterations of the "Chomp Set." People who stutter often find plosive consonants ([t], [d], [k], [g], [p], [b]) extraordinarily difficult to speak, but Scott's poetics do not attempt to explain why because such linguistic scientific inquiry would introduce a different kind of "fact" of the mouth than the immediate, embodied fact that interests Scott. The fact of the mouth is not the science of phonetic production, which is fundamentally a biopolitical technique (Martin, "Speech", St Pierre). The fact of the mouth remains elsewhere, buried in a child's desire to chomp up, spew out, and vomit the remains of language. For Scott, this desire to both ingest and spew out the alphabet remains a potent reminder of the stuttering child's approach to language as something external to it, as something simultaneously pleasurable and threatening. Instead, words are threats experienced as invading forces. The reading body is not merely a medium of reproduction but an active agent of devourment. Scott's opening statement on parasitical reading is a reminder that for people who stutter, ingestion and speech do the work of disordering our relationship with language systems. And, fundamentally, such disordering consists of both pain and pleasure.

Throughout *blert*, Scott refers ironically and facetiously to a range of theories and beliefs about how best to cure stuttered speech. The book's three sections entitled "Valsalvas," for example, each take their title from the process of the Valsalva manoeuvre, an attempted exhalation against a closed airway. The title of these three sections refers implicitly to Western elocutionary beliefs beginning roughly in the late eighteenth century that the cause of stuttered speech is always something mechanical, such as incorrect breathing habits or glottal control.[4] The book's first "Valsalva" opens with three common beliefs about the enigmatic nature of stuttered speech and its relation to fluency: "*Some will not when by themselves. / Some will not when speaking to children or animals. / Some will not when*

4 For sustained accounts of this history, see Rockey and Martin, "Speech."

they sing" (Scott 11). These are general statements readers might find in any textbook on the science of stuttered speech. After these opening observations, the first "Valsalva" asks a repeated question, "*What is the utterance?*" (11). Later "Valsalvas" repeat similar questions, such as "*What is the rhythm?*" (30) and "*What is the syllable?*" (41). Each sequence of repeated questions reads on the page like the internalized echo of questions a speech-language therapist might ask a person who stutters or that a person who stutters might ask themselves in their desires for fluency. Each "Valsalva" includes paragraphs of interrelated words referring to various scientific terms for various invertebrate species, the cellular make up of bones, the cellular and skeletal composition of birds, geological time periods, the regions of the human brain, and neuroimaging. Other sections of the text refer to various hard candies, cereals, and snacks (Gobstoppers, Coco Puffs, Crunch and Munch, Cornflakes) reminiscent of childhood in the 1980s. The result is a text that piles up *meaning* through combination rather than autobiographical narrative or vocal utterance, even while the autobiographical remains intrinsically present. Each "Valsalva" also concludes with a short personal statement that reflects the person who stutter's experiences of the world. What is the utterance? "What a poor crawling thing you are!" (11). What is the rhythm? "All the interim is" (30). What is the syllable? "I am sorry to keep you in wait" (41). The second and third iterations of the "Valsalva" also refer to the various moving parts of the human speech apparatus—the tongue, esophagus, alveola, Broca's area, lips, palate, abdominals, pharynx, cochlear, lungs (30, 41). The result is a text that not only anticipates Scott's own chomping of language during readings but also represents a linguistic reordering of the very machinery of speech. Scientific terminology that might conceptually provide an order or economy to the natural worlds of our own bodies morph into disparate words that Scott's reading mouth might chomp up, devour, and spit out.

Scott juxtaposes these "Valsalvas" with a series of sections entitled "Fable," each of which addresses specific folk cures for stuttered speech. The book's first "Fable" refers broadly to the "*fables that promise*" (16), but it also picks up the reference to "Some" that opens the first "Valsalva." In italics, these references to some people who stutter function as dialogical markers of some external knowledge position (a therapist, an expert, a textbook) that voices general information about stuttered speech. The first "Fable" ruminates upon a Mexican folk remedy for stuttered speech that involves the *chichara* (Spanish for cicada) singing inside the mouth of the person who stutters. Shifting to the autobiographical, Scott writes, "I find one in that field torn in two by the train tracks. Kneel down in the

grass, and it leaps at me. Hold it by its middle, raise it to the sun. Legs pedal slow through heat" (17). The text's second "Fable" refers to another Mexican folk cure also voiced on the page through italics:

> *When zigzags of zebra finches regurgitate the sky a dumb purple, you must put a spoon in your mouth and clap clams for wet tinkerbells. You will lunge your thorax into spring. Open wide —and pollen, like cotton balls, will faint from your lips onto the pawpaw papaya of next syllable. You will learn the drawl of apricot, roll core on glottal, and drool quiet in the comma. You will sing like the birds.* (31)

References to the skeletal makeup of various bird species are numerous throughout *blert*, but here Scott expands upon claims that the zebra finch is one of the few non-human species that stutters. Scott makes this explicit in a section entitled "Jugulum Booyakkashakka," in which he cites a textbook entitled *Australian Finches in Bush and Aviary*. Of zebra finches, Scott paraphrases that "they learned to mumble—not to speak—and it was only after paying attention to the increasing noise of the century, and after they got whitened by the foam of its crest, that they acquired a language" (33). The numerous references to various animal species, combined with the text's many references to Icelandic glacial forms and weather patterns, reorient speech and voice to the natural order in all of its wilderness. The child who stutters, whether in the video game arcades of Coquitlam, British Columbia, the villages of rural Mexico, or down by the train tracks, enters a fabulous world of possible cures and reorientations into the wild.

Scott's third "Fable" continues this act of paraphrasing other textual voices. The text's range of fables introduces echoes of dialogue between, presumably, people who stutter and various others who are always saying something, always offering advice (sometimes strangers, sometimes loved ones, sometimes experts). In this fable, Scott refers to an Icelandic remedy that involves burying the hyoid bone of a lamb in the wall of one's home. But what matters here is the second-person. Scott writes in prose that "If you wish to become an eloquent speaker, you should bury the hyoid bone of a lamb in the wall of your house" (42) because eventually the "Gatling bleat of the lamb will begin to pulp ripe locution into every corner of your abode" (43). Disorienting again the many voices that emerge in the text, Scott concludes this fable by undercutting the personhood of these voicings. The second person shifts from the fluent fools who always offer us advice on how to be fluent to the voice of the skeptical stutterer, while

the first-person voice takes up the ironic positional undercutting of the scientific authority of the speech-language therapist:

> But, you might ask, how will I speak in these rooms? I answer that you will speak the curve of hyoid, cradle-rock syllable until rockabye acrobatics, and the ache for speech before dream. But know that this speech must be neutral, as undynamic as possible. Speak of bloated whales in turquoise coves, of geodesic domes covered in snow, of trout bellows in warm shallows. But you will not speak of tectonics, of limps, fumbles or dropping utensils; you will not speak of crowded similes or dry mouths. You will not speak of volcanics, of sprints or fevers, you will not speak of tongue tides or oscillographs. As soon as your speech turns to these kinds of activities, or activity of any kind, you will find your body resumes its tension, and when we are tense we cannot progress, and progress is the law of life. (43–44)

Scott's voicings powerfully undercut binaries between modern science and wilderness, expert opinion and folk remedy, tension and elasticity, progress and decline. The autobiographical "I" that grounds the text even morphs into an absurd position of authority, uttering demands ("You will not …") that seem to echo nursery rhymes and children's literature.

For Scott, returning to the fact of the mouth is like returning to something foundational or primordial. It might be "the ache for speech before dream" (43), but it remains topographically *there* as a bottom limit. This has always been the question in both medical and literary-philosophical accounts of the origins of stuttered speech: *where* is the stutter? Nineteenth-century British doctor Henry Monro referred to the "ultimate cause" of stammered speech as a "ghostly phantom" that invades the body as if from the outside (2). In the same decade, Charles Kingsley wrote about his own stuttering symptoms as "the dumb devil of stammering" (4). In our own times, novelist David Mitchell refers to his own stammer as a "shady homunculus" or "anti-matter Gollum" ("Let Me Speak"), and the narrator of his novel *Black Swan Green* personifies his own stutter as the "Hangman," a pernicious being originating from a memory of his first stuttering event during a game of Hangman in school. These are metaphors of invasion and habitation.[5] While Scott does not experiment with such metaphorization, *blert* deliberately challenges the elocutionary tradition of

5 For a more detailed account of modern metaphors of the stutter or stammer as an invasive ghost, devil, monster, or creature, see Martin, "Stuttering."

cures for stuttered speech—traditions that have always assumed that cure to such an enigmatic and pernicious disorder might come from deliberate attention to the scientific precision of correct enunciation and vocalization. As Victorian and early twentieth-century medical experts knew, however, such mechanical cures relied on scientific desires prioritizing phonetic precision. For Scott, such scientific facts of vocal production hide a deeper, more provocative and enigmatic fact emerging in childhood relationships with language: a desire to chomp up and spew out words, languages, and symbolic systems.

Such scientific facts of vocal production hide a deeper, more provocative and enigmatic fact emerging in childhood relationships with language: a desire to chomp up and spew out words, languages, and symbolic systems.

Hearing-mouth children

Jackson's *Riddance: The Sybil Joines Vocational School for Ghost Speakers and Hearing-Mouth Children* imagines the mouth not as a limit point for our respective returns to the fact of the mouth, but as a portal to the land of the dead. That is, the mouth is a portal to the "necrocosmos," but only for stutterers and stammerers trained, from childhood, in the complicated and demanding vocal exercises available at Sybil Joines' Vocational School. I can't presume to speak about Jackson's personal experiences with stuttered speech, but *Riddance* reads like a text oddly knowledgeable of nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century theories of cause and cure for stuttered speech. The text even references some of the nineteenth-century's most celebrated experts in the cure for stuttering and stammering, such as Jean-Marie Gaspard Itard and Marc Colombat, and many late-century experts in elocution, orthography, and shorthand.[6] Like Scott's *blert*, Jackson's novel collapses distinctions between the scientific and the folk-spiritual, provocatively challenging medical models of cure and management by reimagining the "science" of speech-language pathology as training in the complicated art of navigating the necrocosmos. As Jackson writes in a 2008 speculative literary essay that introduces the concept of the Vocational School for Ghost Speakers and Hearing-Mouth Children, the most successful of necronauts are those who have "employed a speech impediment so extreme that the self, tied to it like a diver to a brick, was torn loose from speech-time and carried down through her own mouth to that Land where words are things and language, landscape" (88–89). In their respective literary approaches to the mouth, both Scott and Jackson reflect a turn in the ethics of reading away from the *figural* to what Sara Guyer calls "*buccal* reading" (79). Guyer asks the question, "what if we began to read according to the mouth—the opening, the eating, kissing,

6 See Rockey.

biting … mouth—and its depths?" (79). In Guyer's reading of Derrida's work on ethics and responsibility, such a question allows for the possibility of a "reorientation" (79) of rhetorical reading in the relationship between literature and ethics. This reorientation also has tremendous potential for considerations of stuttered speech because, as Scott and Jackson imply, the sonic blocks and repetitions of actual dysfluencies return *reading* to the mouth, not the "giving and taking of voice and visibility" (Guyer 79).

Founded in the 1890s, the Sybil Joines Vocational School trains children who stutter not how to cure or manage their unruly tongues but to become *necronauts* in the land of the dead through a wide range of experimental and controversial exercises and techniques that bend, shape, and contort the mouth, lip, tongue, cheek, and throat. The school's methods come under some scrutiny as reports of missing students and eventually a missing school inspector make their rounds in the local newspapers. Through such reimagining of the institutional history of schools and clinics for children who stutter, Jackson produces a sustained fictional experimentation in the sonic intersections of speech, writing, time, and dysfluency. I would call it an allegorical meditation, but that would be to limit its provocative account of the potentially productive and joyous pleasures of stuttered speech.

As a work of fictional found documents, *Riddance* consists of a range of scholarly and historical voices. The narrative frame is the unnamed editor's introduction to the text, which opens with a description of how they learned of the Sybil Joines Vocational School in a newspaper clipping tucked away and "ghosting" (4) the pages of an early-twentieth-century elocution handbook in an obscure off-campus bookshop. The introduction outlines the editor's scholarly fascination with this obscure historical reference to the Sybil Joines Vocational School and its theories and practices concerning the special abilities of the mouths of young stuttering children. The editor refers to "minority" truths about the nature of speech and voice that in the end are neither fully true nor false but, rather, *"crepuscular"* (10). Scientific knowledge aspires to bring all truth into the light, but the nature of speech and voice always remain in the dim twilight. Scholarly faith in the (auto)biographical and the authorial require, in the editor's estimation, extensive ontological and epistemological revision because the school's "scribes and archivists alike were in agreement that a self is a mere back-formation of a voice that itself belongs to no one, or to the dead" (10). The editor notes that the current head of the school "derives her authority from the demonstration that she is the mouthpiece for the previous headmistress, who was the mouthpiece for the previous head-

mistress, and so on" (10). In essence, the "Sybil Joines" in the novel's title consists of multiple headmistresses who have taken on the name since its founder in the 1890s.

What follows the editor's Introduction is a "a map, a manual" (12) of documents organized in such a fashion that readers can *enter* the book at any point. The two main strands of the collection are "The Final Dispatch" of the "original" Sybil Joines herself (or the presumption of such an original) and "The Stenographer's Story," a personal story transcribed by one of Joines's students, Jane Grandison, who will eventually become the school's second headmistress. The editor has divided the book into seventeen chapters, each consisting of chronological sections of the two main strands plus a range of supplemental textual documents, including various "Readings" and "Letters to Dead Authors." *Riddance* also includes extensive fictionalized illustrations of newspaper clippings, images from textbooks, handbooks, guides, and charts. The result is a disorienting and playful rumination on the intrinsic relationship between stuttered speech and the voices of the dead.

In one of her letters to Herman Melville, Joines writes that "stuttering, like writing, is an amateur form of necromancy" (60). This argument reappears numerous times in the text as the collection of documents begin to build up a coherent story world and a legible account of vocational school doctrine about the mouth as a portal to the dead. One of the fictional excerpts included in the editor's collection is from *The Principles of Necrophysics*, a textbook for stutterers learning how to channel the voices of the dead through their mouths:

> It is hard to believe that stuttering and stammering were ever regarded as speech *impediments*. Today we know that they indicate a natural aptitude for ghost-speaking. This is partly because to yield your mouth to the voice of another, you must suppress what you may be used to thinking of as "your own" voice. But more important, it is because stuttering and stammering cause a local fluctuation in the directionality of time. (109)

This statement reinforces the editor's summarization of school doctrine. In their note to the first instalment of Joines's "Final Dispatch," the editor writes that "*Time is speech-time, according to Vocational School Doctrine: We talk our way through the timeless land of the dead in a sort of bathysphere made of words, creating both ourselves and the landscape through which we move*" (15). In another letter to Melville later in the novel's col-

lection of documents, Joines writes of her students that "the dead pour through them without impediment" (321). She asks rhetorically, "what is speech but the endless prattle of the dead?" (322). Jackson's fictional account of school doctrine undercuts medical models of stuttered speech, its causes and potential cures, and speculatively reimagines elocutionary training as a process of teaching stuttering children to maximize their innate talents as mouthpieces for the dead. Joines does seem to exploit her students—those "broken" and "cracked" (61) vessels—for their talents, as she excavates the ectoplasmic "mouth objects" that fall from their mouths as a biproduct of their explorations in the necrocosmos. These tiny objects, collected and catalogued by the school, embody official doctrine that "material things of our world were already a debased kind of speech, just as the ectoplasmic 'mouth objects' were" (344). Finally, official school doctrine insists that "language is viscous emission" (351) and human bodies are containers for all kinds of holes (352).

Like Scott's *blert*, Jackson's text explores childhood traumas of stuttered speech and childhood desires for fluency, but Joines begins "My Childhood" with a description of her own perceived exceptionality, rather than her flaws or defects in speech. She describes an early childhood experience of attempting to say her name to a friend. Joines writes/speaks/transcribes (because we already know from the editor's note that this particular voice is a transcription of the dead Sybil speaking through the mouth of the current headmistress of the school) that she remembers a particular

> burn … [n]ot just for the barbaric sound I am making—a spiccato spizzle—but for the hair stuck to my cheek, the stinging spot where my frock chafes, my index finger, twisting my skirt into a garrote. For my whole, objectionable person. It is as if I have been precipitated out of fumes and intimations only now, when the thick, wet, rubbery *fact* of tongue and lip makes itself felt. (29)

In another scene from her childhood, Joines describes her strange pride in the monstrosity of her own stuttered speech. "My mouth," she writes, "felt bigger, if possible, than the head it was set in, and as violently resistant to socialization as a kraken, strapped to my face in place of a mouth and enjoined to speak … That there was something of pride in my feelings toward this monstrosity, I did not then recognize" (41). It is amazing to me how *Riddance* and Scott's *blert* both return to this particular epistemology of the mouth as a particular kind of fact.

While Scott's *blert* concludes with a reorientation of the stutter to the elemental processes of the natural world through a father's reminder to his son that he stutters like a river (64), in Jackson's novel this description of childhood experiences does not have the same emancipatory sense of parental reorientation to the wilderness. As Joines writes, her stutter did not "endear" (30) her to her parents. On the contrary, her father, a violent and abusive man, was a "scientific American" (33) who insisted upon an orderliness and precision to his world. Joines's childhood recollections of her father's elocutionary training and fetishistic collection of contraptions resembles the many new instruments and techniques developed in late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries for managing or curing stuttered speech. Some of Joines's references are historically accurate, such as her father's collection of write ups and documents pertaining to Colombat's *muthonome* or *orthophonic lyre* or Itard's "little golden fork" meant to be inserted in the mouth during speech (39), while others later in the novel are thoroughly speculative, such as Joines's Reflectograph, Communigraph, Dynamistograph, and Cylinders of Matla (87), among countless others. Under her father's persistent attempts at ridding her of her stutter, Joines's mouth became "a site of modern industry, well-regulated and productive, rolling forth (conveyed by belts and pulleys) a serene procession of die-cut, stainless-steel, copper-bottomed sentiments, accompanied by appropriate gestures" (40).

At the core of Jackson's novel is a philosophical exploration of the stutter's collapse of epistemological distinctions between speech and text, living and dead. Joines discusses her father's belief that the spoken word precedes the written. As a child, Joines resisted this fatherly phonocentrism, often to the detriment of her own physical safety. Describing how she would sneak into her father's library like an Eve to read his voluminous collection of scientific textbooks and treatises, Joines's voicings of her own childhood deliberately challenges his weak beliefs that science might cure speech defects or that the facts of vocal production stem from scientific knowledge. She writes that "nothing in the groans and hoots of speech suggested to me that it was made up of such articles" (49). Moreover, she continues in her account of the relationship between speech and text: "If speech was made of such spiky characters [as the written words on a page] it did not surprise me that they got caught in my throat and tangled up in one another. The marvel was to see them in such quiet and orderly ranks upon the plot of the page. One thought of cemeteries" (50).

As Joines's health deteriorates from tuberculosis, her theories about the mouth shift and morph. Any orifice in the body becomes a possible

site for contact with the dead. Her privileged metaphors change shape. As Grandison writes in her contributions to the collection, Joines's investigations "led her steadily farther from the mouth" (371). Grandison writes this statement at a significant moment in the text as she contemplates her own potential for becoming Joines's successor as headmistress. Not coincidentally, this instalment of her "story" also includes subtle paraphrasing in which Joines's narrative voice merges with Grandison's, who asks in defense of the headmistress's new theory, "if you shed the parochial attachment to the human vessel, and even more specifically to the mouth as the privileged portal of meaning, couldn't you find speech anywhere stuff was? Material objects were merely a less lively form of language" (372). This is a curious textual moment because it functions like an occasion for free indirect discourse, but the entire apparatus of the novel's composition calls into question the distinction between one voice-body and another voice-body. Joines begins to see herself as "a jumble of stuff" (372) more akin to antlers and mushrooms than other people. Compounding this analogy to the animal world, Joines describes her childhood stutter after killing her father through the language of the wilderness—"a hedge, a thicket, a wall of thorns" (394). The novel playfully challenges the conventions and tropes of poststructuralist theories of language, including an explicit morphing of the linguistic distinction between signifier and signified. This is not a deconstructive playfulness because signifier and signified don't remain in constant state of slipping and slide. Rather, the novel contemplates their lumping together. While Jackson's story world imagines the possibility of the collapse of distinctions between speech and text through fictions of the supernatural, its exploration of stuttering relies fundamentally on jubilation and joy in the childhood recognition of the mouth as a portal to the realm of the dead. Stuttering undoes our most cherished epistemological assumptions about the separation of the living and the dead.

Noises of otherness

Scott's closing remark in *blert* that his text is a return to the child's desire to chomp up the alphabet and Joines's reminiscence of her childhood ingestion of printed words evoke that peculiar sense of a powerful undoing of selfhood that I argue is present in the experiences of people who stutter. More particularly, both texts explore the fact of the mouth through this sense of a childhood wildness prior to complete entrance into language where texts and alphabets are chomped up and consumed, sometimes playfully and other times through a powerful sense of the potency of one's authority prior to language.

Despite Eagle's warning against the romanticization of stuttering in philosophical contemplations of language, I conclude this essay in part with de Certeau's compelling and profoundly complicated essay on "Vocal Utopias" that theorizes *glossolalia* or speaking in tongues across a range of forms from childish rhymes and pathological word play to literary and religious utterances. For de Certeau, glossolalia "resembles a language but is not one"; it is a "semblance of language that can be fabricated when one knows its phonetic rules" (29). Glossolalias always "push up through the cracks of ordinary conversation: bodily noises, quotations, of delinquent sounds, and fragments of others' voices punctuate the order of sentences with breaks and surprises … The major voice, while claiming to be the messenger of meaning, appears caught up in a doubling that compromises it" (29–30). But this is not all:

> Political, scholarly, and religious discourses […] all progressively close themselves off to that which emerges where voice ruptures or interrupts a series of propositions, to that which is born where the other is present. A fragility disappears from discourse. With the erasure of occasional stammers, hesitations, and vocal tics, or lapses and drifting sounds, the interlocutor is removed to a distance, transformed into audience.
>
> By contrast, conversation reopens the surface of discourse to these *noises of otherness*. As it approaches its addressee, speech becomes fragile. Different voices disrupt the organizing system of meaning. Weeds between the paving stones. (30)

Notice the emphasis here on those professional discourses that progressively reduce speech and conversation to discourse and remove the fragilities. This is the scenario of complaint for people who stutter. Our interlocutors remove themselves into the distance; they become audiences who no longer experience the noises of otherness in immediate conversation and instead professionally seek to limit and define meaning in our dysfluencies. When we analyze or interpret the stutter and essentially give it meaning and diagnose a cause, we also limit its disruptive potentials. As literary critics with interests in voice and sonicity, this is precisely what happens when we approach literary expressions and representations of people (children) who stutter with the intention of extracting metaphorical meaning: we remove its fragilities and become merely audience.

Scott's *blert* and Jackson's *Riddance* both gesture toward this sense of the reader as stepping closer toward the position of interlocutor. Provocatively, they both prefer to let the weeds growing between the paving stones

and the noises of otherness become incongruous with the text itself. The challenge for readers then is how to precisely ingest such textual stutters and their resistance to meaning. Writing of the intersections of Blackness, music, and dysfluency, J-j-j-jerome Ellis argues that each are "forces that open time" (216). For Ellis, the stutter has the capacity to both reveal and remedy the experiences of temporal subjection. Blackness, dysfluency, and music "open and shape time" and as a result "create alternative temporalities that can help us heal from the wounds of that subjection" (218). Referring to his own dysfluent voice, Ellis writes that

> stuttering (especially in the form I present with, the glottal block)[7] creates unpredictable, silent gaps in speech. I call these gaps *clearings*. When this happens while I'm speaking with someone, I often feel like time has stopped. If fluent speech (and by extension fluent time) is a path through a forest, when I stutter I come into a clearing where the path temporarily disappears. The clearing opens the present moment. But when my interlocutor interrupts me while I'm stuttering, the expanded present is foreclosed. (219)

When the path disappears and clearings emerge, Ellis dwindles joyously in unknowable and unsayable pockets of time. In the emerging body of literature on speech dysfluencies, the *meaning* of the stutter emerges precisely in such clearings that open time and introduce pockets of shared experience.

Scott's recent pseudo-adaptation of *blert* into an award-winning children's book, *I Talk Like a River*, is perhaps the ultimate expression of this temporality of the clearing. Scott's narrator tells of a "bad speech day" at school and how his father took him to the river for some quiet alone time. The title of the book stems from *blert*'s "Author's Note," where Scott first writes of his father's observation that he talks like a river. Scott's narrator thinks of "the calm river beyond the rapids where the water is smooth and glistening. This is how my mouth moves. This is how I speak. Even the river stutters. Like I do." This reimagining of the stuttering child's voice as akin to the staccato and temporally punctuated flow of river water dwells in metaphorization, but fundamentally, like *blert* and *Riddance*, it also powerfully resists a romantization of language systems. The distinction between a child's body (and voice) and the world around it (awash with words) collapses.

7 If readers are curious, my own stutter also presents as frequent, unexpected glottal blocks.

Works Cited

de Certeau, Michel. "Vocal Utopias: Glossolalias." *Representations* 56 (1996): 29–47.

Deleuze, Gilles. "He Stuttered." *Essays Critical and Clinical*. Trans. Daniel W. Smith and Michael A. Greco. Verso, 1998. 107–14.

Dworkin, Craig. "The Stutter of Form." *The Sound of Poetry/The Poetry of Sound*. Eds. Marjorie Perloff and Craig Dworkin. University of Chicago Press, 2009. 166–83.

Eagle, Christopher. *Dysfluencies: On Speech Disorders in Modern Literature*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2014.

———. "Introduction: Talking Normal." *Literature, Speech Disorders, and Disability: Talking Normal*. Ed. Chris Eagle. Routledge, 2014. 1–8.

Ellis, J-j-j-j-jerome. "The Clearing." *Journal of Interdisciplinary Voice Studies* 5.2 (2020): 215–33.

Gurevitch, Zali. "The Tongue's Break Dance: Theory, Poetry, and the Critical Body." *Sociological Quarterly* 40.3 (1999): 525–40.

Guyer, Sara. "Buccality." *Derrida, Deleuze, Psychoanalysis*. Eds. Gabriele Schwab and Erin Ferris. Columbia UP, 2007. 77–104.

Jackson, Shelley. "Early Dispatches From the Land of the Dead: From the Archives of the Shelley Jackson Vocational School for Ghost Speakers and Hearing-Mouth Children." *Conjunctions* 51 (2008): 88–102.

———. *Riddance*: *The Sybil Joines Vocational School for Ghost Speakers and Hearing-Mouth Children*. Black Balloon (Catapult), 2018.

Johnson, Jeffrey K. "The Hero with a Thousand Dysfluencies: The Changing Portrayals of People Who Stutter." *Mental Illness in Popular Media: Essays on the Representation of Disorders*. Ed. Lawrence C. Rubin. McFarland, 2012. 11–24.

Kingsley, Charles. "The Irrationale of Speech." *Fraser's Magazine* 60 (1859): 1–14.

Martin, Daniel. "Speech: Dysfluent Temporalities in the Long Nineteenth Century." *A Cultural History of Disability in the Long Nineteenth Century*. Eds. Joyce L. Huff and Martha Stoddard Holmes. Bloomsbury, 2021. 113–28.

———. "Stuttering from the Anus." *Canadian Journal of Disability Studies* 5.3 (2016): 114–34.

McCormac, Henry. *A Treatise on the Cause and Cure of Hesitation of Speech, Or Stammering*. Longman, Rees, Orme, Brown, and Green, 1828.

Mitchell, David. *Black Swan Green: A Novel.* Random House, 2007.

———. "Let Me Speak." *Telegraph*. 30 April 2006. www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/3652013/Let-me-speak.htm.

Mitchell, David T., and Sharon L. Snyder. *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse*. University of Michigan Press, 2000.

Rockey, Denyse. *Speech Disorder in Nineteenth Century Britain: The History of Stuttering*. Croom Helm, 1980.

Rodness, Roshaya. "Stutter and Phenomena: The Phenomenology and Deconstruction of Delayed Auditory Feedback." *Journal of Interdisciplinary Voice Studies* 5.2 (2020): 197–213.

Scott, Jordan. *blert*. Coach House Books, 2008.

———. *I Talk Like a River*. Neal Porter Books, 2020.

Sheehan, Joseph. *Stuttering: Research and Therapy*. Harper and Row, 1970.

Shell, Marc. *Stutter*. Harvard UP, 2005.

Stewart, Garrett. *Reading Voices: Literature and the Phonotext*. University of California Press, 1990.

St Pierre, Joshua. *Cheap Talk: Disability and the Politics of Communication*. University of Michigan Press, 2022.

Stuart, Maria. "Dysfluency Studies: Rewriting Cultural Narratives of Stammering." *Clinical Cases in Dysfluency*. Eds. Kurt Eggers and Margaret M. Leahy. Routledge, 2023.