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Béatrice Pire

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STUTTERING IN *AMERICAN PASTORAL* BY PHILIP ROTH AND *PURPLE AMERICA* BY RICK MOODY

Béatrice Pire

Université Sorbonne Nouvelle - Paris 3

« Nous bégayons longtemps nos pensées avant d'en trouver le mot propre, comme les enfants bégayent longtemps leurs paroles avant de pouvoir en prononcer toutes les lettres » Joseph Joubert, *Carnets*¹

« Avec eux je chancelle, avec eux je bégaie » Victor Hugo, *l'Art d'être grand-père XII*, 'Un manque'²

Since Herman Melville and Billy Budd, few American writers have created characters with a speech defect, which does not mean that they did not shape young protagonists with a language of their own - from Mark Twain's Huck Finn, or Faulkner's Vardaman in *As I Lay Dying* (obsessively repeating that 'his mother is a fish'), to Salinger's Holden Caulfield and his verbal tics or teenage slang. A great amount of authors have given children or youths a language of their own to convey their sensations and accurately display their vision of the world. Within the last decade of the millenium however, young characters of another species with another species of speech impediment have emerged, notably Merry Levov in *American Pastoral* by Philip Roth and Hex Raitliff in *Purple America* by Rick Moody. Surprisingly, neither Roth nor Moody ever suffered from this disorder except perhaps for Moody, who did confess in an interview for the *New York Times* that writing was for him a "release from some of the vertiginous anxiety of speaking" and that "language, even as it seeks to reveal, also performs an obfuscatory action", adding in reference to Jacques Lacan that "the desire to express

¹ "We long stammer our thoughts before we find the right word, as children long stammer their speech before they can pronounce all of their letters » (translation mine). I am grateful to Oulipo's secretary Marcel Benabou for bringing this quote to my attention.

² "With them I stagger, with them I stammer" (translation mine).

yourself exceeds the ability to get there”³. However, Moody was never a stutterer like some English or American authors including Lewis Carroll, Somerset Maugham or Henry James to mention the most famous. And none among them ever fashioned a stuttering character. Only John Updike devoted a chapter to his speech problem in “Getting the words out”, the third chapter of his memoirs entitled *Self-Consciousness*⁴. Variousy calling this problem ‘stammering’ and ‘stuttering’, Updike seems either to have suffered from both fluency disorders or simply used them interchangeably and yet no stuttering protagonist appears elsewhere in his fiction.

In *American Pastoral* as in *Purple America*, speech impediment is left unexplained, as it is usually the case in the history of stuttering. Throughout the centuries, the disease has been traced to the deformation of the tongue, of the lips or of the palate, to humoral imbalance, to vice and guilt, to strict upbringing and/or childhood trauma. Treatments have included drugs, psychoanalysis, electric shocks, not to mention the oldest therapy that Demosthenes, the most famous stutterer in Western history, imposed on himself: speaking with stones in the mouth, strapping on lead weights while running uphill, reciting to himself and declaiming above the waves. Why the characters of Merry Levov and Hex Raitliff stutter remains as unclear as the mysterious origins of speech deficiency. Yet the novels provide moments that, beyond the sensation of hampered speech, may help to understand the cause of the malady and on a larger scale illuminate the novelists’ vision of language.

In both cases at least, it seems that stuttering has a metaphysical or religious significance, in the footsteps of Billy Budd, whose imperfection may result from the presence of evil and malevolent forces disturbing the world of beauty and perfection created by God. This suggestion was made earlier in American fiction, long before Henry James or John Updike reflected on their impediment. The Puritan minister Cotton Mather wrote in 1724 the first American treatise on stuttering in *The Angel of Bethesda, an Essay Upon the Common Maladies of Mankind* where he attributed various illnesses to divine and demonic sources. He explained his own deficiency in the spiritual context

³ Interview by Bill Goldstein, *New York Times* on the web, February 1, 2001 <http://www.nytimes.com/books/01/02/25/specials/moody-audio.html>, Accessed October 3, 2017.

⁴ John Updike, *Self-consciousness: Memoirs*, New York: Random House, 1989.

of sins of Pride and Anger, discerning in it the hand of a chastening God⁵. Merry Levov is likewise a fallen creature, the main representative of the last two parts of the novel entitled 'The Fall' and 'Paradise Lost'. As the Rimrock bomber, she's her father's nightmare, an angry child, the opposite of Seymour Levov's good will and pastoral innocence. A hater, a killer, a 'stain' (385), she's a biblical and satanic figure as well as a historical and political character fashioned after revolutionnary radicals and outlaws. She embodies anarchy, irrationality and lust for destruction, following the Weathermen's motto: "We are against everything that is good and decent in honky America. We will loot and burn and destroy. We are the incubation of your mother's nightmares." Rebellious like Satan, a mysterious curse or a demonically possessed insurrectionist, she brings in, and embodies chaos, and is "the daughter who is chaos itself" (231).

Following a less religious interpretation, the novel also suggests a connection between childhood trauma and the character's stutter. Though he never wrote in lengthy detail about stuttering patients, Freud interpreted the defect as the conscious symptom of an unconscious conflict related to earlier trauma. Two traumas possibly explain the young protagonist's later involvement in terrorist attacks. One is watching the self-immolation of Buddhist monk on the TV news, an experience perceived as a formative moment of her commitment to the anti-war movement. The second is her father's kiss on the lips when she was an older child. Yes none of these events happened before Merry began stuttering. At least they can be understood as reenactments of former unconscious conflicts the novel does not relate. Freud also argues that stuttering has to do with a conflict over excremental functions where the vocal and oral opening is converted into a sphincter⁶. While normal

⁵ Cotton Mather, *The Angel of Bethesda, an Essay Upon the Common Maladies of Mankind*. Gordon Jones (ed.), Barre, American Antiquarian Society, 1972. Mather also explores mental madness in a spiritual context and affirms that it requires the confession of guilt and unworthiness, but also traditional folk medicine such as "the Blood of an Ass drawn from behind his Ear". See in Gerard N. Grob, *The Mad Among Us: A History of the Care of America's Mentally Ill*, the 1st chapter devoted to Colonial America and Cotton Mather's treatise. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995, pp.5-23). See also Carol Gray, "The Fettered Tongue: A Study of the Speech Defect of Cotton Mather", *American Literature*, vol. 46, 4, Durham, Duke University Press, 1975, pp. 451-464.

⁶ Freud Sigmund, "The case of Emmy von N." in *Studies on Hysteria*, transl. A.A. Brill, Boston, Beacon Press, 1937 (1895), pp. 32-76.

speech is an act of giving out, expelling something of oneself into the outside world, stuttering and especially blocking by analogy represents constipation. By the end of the novel when Levov finds his daughter living as a Jain⁷, she had not only stopped stuttering but also smells of feces (“a mad human being who grubs for pleasure in its own shit”, 265; “this veiled intruder reeking of feces”, 421). Directed towards the parents, Merry’s stuttering also reveals a conflict over food and the nurturing mother. She refuses to eat the lunches her mother packs for her, “getting rid of whatever her mother gave her for lunch” (227), accepting “almost nothing she was served at home” (100). At the age of 16 she gorges herself on “cheeseburgers with French fries, pizza, BLT’s, fried onion rings, vanilla milk shakes, root floats, [...] and cake of any kind, so that almost overnight she became large, a large, loping, slovenly sixteen-year-old (100). While some critics read this relationship with food as a rebellion against family expectations and values and a protest against the thin Western body that her mother, a beauty queen, incarnates, I think it plays the same function as stuttering⁸. The stuttering child may only be the mirror-image of a formerly ambivalent feeding mother, Dawn, hateful of her daughter as the eye-opener Rita Cohen points out⁹. Far from securing autonomy from the expectations of her family and then of society, Merry’s relation to food and stutter are enslaving and signs of powerlessness and selflessness as well as expressions of violence and anger. “Ever since she was a kid, every word she spoke was a bomb” (279). Her self is torn into pieces like her broken speech. Speaking

⁷ Jainism is an ancient Indian religion emphasizing non-violence toward all living beings including animals.

⁸ Sarah Bylund, “Merry Levov’s BLT Crusade: Food-Fueled Revolt in Roth’s *American Pastoral*”, *Philip Roth Studies*, Spring 2010.

⁹ See Anne Van Hout and Françoise Etienne, *Les bégaiements*, Paris, Masson, 2002, p. 15: stuttering is a “neurotic continuation of the oral stage in infancy” (“une perpétuation névrotique du stade oral de la petite enfance”, translation mine) or “a neurosis arrested in the anal stage, reflexing a cannibalistic devoration directed towards the parents” (“une névrose fixée au stade anal, témoignant d’une dévoration cannibale dirigée contre les parents”, translation mine).

Stuttering patients have feeding problems usually resulting from a “stuttering nourishing mother”; “While feeding the infant, the ‘stuttering nourishing mother’ would have had a tentative and ambivalent behavior, made of aggressive gestures and sudden interruptions, all anxiety-ridden.” (“Dans la situation d’alimentation du nourrisson, la mère ‘nourrice bégayante’ aurait eu une attitude hésitante et ambivalente, faite d’alternance de gestes agressifs et d’interruptions soudaines, les uns et les autres accompagnés d’anxiété”, translation mine) *Ibid*, p. 57.

fluently would be an acknowledgement of her desiring self that she resists¹⁰. Consequently Merry defies her parents, America and herself, keeping her true self secret, hidden within and separated from the outside world. Concerned with children's problems and himself a fiction maker of vulnerable children, Charles Dickens well described the wall between the I and the world that stuttering, or psellism, induces in a short essay on the malady: "Stammering rises as a barrier by which the sufferer feels that the world without is separated from the world within him."¹¹ Similarly, the father only realizes at the end of Roth's novel that the child's separation from the outside world may result from a self-division that he himself started by embracing the American dream of assimilation, passing as WASP, marrying a non-Jew and repressing his community's religious and ethnic identity against his own father's warning. "His father was right. [...] They raised a child who was neither Catholic nor Jew, who instead was first a stutterer, then a killer, then a Jain" (386). Lou Levov's "Viking mask of blue-eyed blond" (3) exemplifies a self-division repeated in the daughter's stutter, her desperate attempt to repress selfhood within, not let it come out, and eventually in her wearing the veil¹². Displacing on a visual level the verbal block indeed allows the character to be fluent again as the father discovers. "If she was no longer branded as Merry Levov by her stutter, she was marked unmistakably by the eyes." (266) The physical mask liberates Merry's speech, as it happens to most stutters¹³. Now that she has become, as some critics

¹⁰ Anne Van Hout and Françoise Etienne argue that the stuttering child never becomes capable of identifying himself as a desiring subject. "Never becoming autonomous, the stuttering subject never chooses himself, neither in relation to others nor in his own body. He is weak and powerless from the mouth onward." ("L'accès à l'autonomie n'étant jamais atteint, le sujet bègue ne se choisit pas lui-même, ni dans le rapport qu'il a avec les autres, ni dans son corps. Il est faible, impuissant dès la bouche." Translation mine) *Ibid.*, p. 58.

¹¹ Charles Dickens, "Psellism: the Act of Stammering" (1856) in *Household Words*, XIV, pp. 464-469.

¹² "Stuttering is saying and not saying, vehemently willing to say and desperately repressing what could be said, willing to keep secret what the intrusion of others wants to remove from us."

("Bégayer c'est dire et ne pas dire, vouloir dire avec violence et réfréner ce qui pourrait être dit avec l'énergie du désespoir, vouloir désespérement garder secret ce que l'intrusion des autres veut nous arracher." Translation mine) Lucie Goldsmit, "Traitement des bégaiements" in Alain Morgon & Paule Aimard, *Orthophonie*, Paris, Masson, 1988, p. 63.

¹³ Dickens notes that: "It is not rare for stammerers who have assumed a mask, to cease to stammer under their disguise." op.cit. John Updike also supports the interpretation of

note, the Wandering Jew that her father had forgotten, forsaken and erased under the mask of assimilation, secrecy is longer necessary¹⁴. Now that she remembers Jerusalem and reconnects with her people's past and history, the tongue may be fluent again as Psalm 137 commands ("If I do not remember thee, Jerusalem, may my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth"). It is striking to note that the moment Merry stops stuttering and begins to show visible signs of a retrieved identity, the father starts in turn to withdraw into in his delusory self and to accede to his daughter's critique of him. One can even support the interpretation that the father fully recognizes his daughter and identifies to her when he throws up on her face, an oral equivalent of her speech impediment¹⁵. 'Now speak ! he commanded her. [...] He pried her mouth open [...] and with his fingers took hold of her tongue. [...] when he cried out, *Who are you !*' it was spewed with his words onto her face. [...] She was all his. [...] The veil was off, but behind the veil there was another veil. Isn't there always ? » (265-266) Merry's stuttering reestablishes 'the other' missing in the Swede's fairy-tale of himself as estranged from its origins. As such, she's not only a character in Roth's fiction but the double of the author who, following Gilles Deleuze's reflexions on literature, makes standard language stutter, pits a foreign language within language and unfolds the narrative of the unassimilated and foreign Seymour Levov veiled behind the gentile and standard American dream¹⁶. Merry is the agent of her

freedom given by masks: "Any mechanism which displaces your customary voice eliminates the stoppage; the captive tongue is released into Maskenfreiheit, the freedom conferred by masks." in *Self-consciousness*, op.cit. Nicole Fabre also says: "I think that stuttering is a mask, much more a mask than any other symptom" ("Je crois que le bégaiement est un masque, bien plus masque que n'importe quel autre symptôme") in *Bégayer, des cailloux plein la bouche*, Paris, Fleurus, 2004, p.10.

¹⁴ "Roth has conjured [Merry] into a postmodern, female version of the Wandering Jew", Sarah Bylund, *op.cit.*, p.26. See also Timothy Parrish, "The End of Identity : Philip Roth's *American Pastoral*", *Shofar* 19.1 (Fall 2000), pp. 84-99. Hana Wirth Neshet, "Philip Roth's Counter Pastoral : the Return of History" in Velichka Ivanona, *Reading Philip Roth's American Pastoral*, Toulouse, Presses Universitaires du Mirail, 2011, p. 27-32

¹⁵ Anne Van Hout and Françoise Estienne correlate the stuttering child with the ambivalent nourishing mother that the child either drinks or vomits: "The mother's speech is drunk or vomited", *op.cit.*, p.57. Nicole Fabre notes that "stuttering has the strength of spitting and vomiting", *op.cit.*, p. 34.

¹⁶ "L'écrivain se sert de mots, mais en créant une syntaxe qui les fait passer dans la sensation, et qui fait bégayer la langue courante, ou trembler, ou crier, ou même chanter : c'est le style, le 'ton', le langage des sensations, ou la langue étrangère dans la langue." ("The writer uses words but by creating a syntax that makes them pass into

father's seeing and crossing the mirror of appearances in the end. Only her stutter allows this passing from what Deleuze calls a 'language of denotation' to 'a language of expression, or sense'¹⁷.

Purple America is another novel about the crisis of communication and the failure of speech exemplified by the young stuttering protagonist, Hex Raitliff. Not only does the character stutter out his words, but as his mother gets old and sick, she needs the electronic device of a computer to be able to speak. Rick Moody's narrative interrogates the status of language in Post-War America and its corruption identified with the Cold War and its propaganda. Although, as for Merry Levov, the origin of the stutter is never clarified, it is suggested here, as with Roth's stutterer, that the son's impediment may result from the father's deceptive identity. In his obituary that he himself wrote, the father "purposefully lied about his education, his military record, his background, his wife's background, even his own middle name." (64) Allen Raitliff, like Lou Levov, is one of those American fathers who invented and created their own selves in relation to America's national history. While the Swede experimented his self as a WASP, Hex's father dreamt that he was a yankee: "Allen created and nurtured the idea that he was a *Yankee*, that his roots were entwined with the origins of the nation. But this was just a longing." (64) However in Allen's case, the deceit is meant to conceal his former work in the Southwest, his involvement in the construction of nuclear weapons and consequently secure the secrecy of his country's hidden history. The son's trouble seems to result from the father's troubled identity and difficulty to tell the truth but also from a strict education, including the fear and terror raised by physical abuse and tyranny¹⁸: "[Allen was]

sensation that makes the standard language stammer, tremble, cry or even sing: this is the style, the 'tone', the language of sensations, or the foreign language within language.") Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari, *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie*, Paris, Editions de Minuit, 1991, pp. 166-167; *What is Philosophy?*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1994, p. 176.

¹⁷ "Passer de l'autre côté du miroir [...] c'est arriver dans une région où le langage n'a plus de rapport avec des désignés, mais seulement des exprimés, c'est-à-dire avec le sens". Gilles Deleuze *Logique du sens*, Paris, Minuit, 1969, p. 38 ("To pass to the other side of the mirror [...] is to reach a region where language no longer has any relation to what it denotes, but only to that which it expresses, that is to sense.") *The Logic of Sense*, transl. Mark Lester, London, The Athlone Press, 1990, p. 25.

¹⁸ Stutter would be the child's reaction to highly demanding parents. See Annie Anzieu, "Sur quelques traits de la personnalité du bégue", *Bulletin de psychologie clinique*, numéro 270, tome 21, année 1968, pp. 1022-1028.

capable of such fits of rectitude that Hex's derriere was blue where Allen had paddled it" (31). The only moment when the impediment stops is when Hex, at the age of 13, meets two beatnick decorators working in the family house and smokes his first joint in their van. The experience is a formative moment and marks a step from childhood to adulthood as the workers provide both a countermodel to Hex's conservative and strict family and a mode of manhood: "There was something about their calculated slothfulness, their sexual ease, the way they removed their shirts for no reason at all, the way they rarely bathed, their jazz argot, that was frighteningly seductive for a boy who'd lost his dad" (122). The lesson or training they give is delivered in a voice that the boy identifies as the voice of God: "Those men with their voices *like the g-g-g-guy who p-p-p-played the v-v-v-voice of G-god in The T-ten C-c-c-commandments*" (126). Like Moses who asked God to ease his speech so that he might be understood, or as in the Bible where the eradication of stammering, among other afflictions, coincides with the redemption of the world, Hex finds a cure to his handicap in these god-like, father-like 'remodelers' and initiators into drugs, poetry and music¹⁹: "*I'm speaking now, to see what it sounds like, [...] without stammering. A miracle!*" If the abusive father, obsessed with war and the military, is the cause of the child's deficiency, only a father figure, in a substitutive and benevolent form, seems able to provide remedy. Like Merry Levov, Hex Raitliff does not seem to represent the traumatic outside of language, the outside of the law, the phallus or the Father. The stammer signals the absence of a third element but also mirrors a protest against this missing father and the verbal attempt to conjure it up²⁰. It is a recognition of a ground collapsing underneath, as John Updike argues that one stutters when one can't feel the ground under one's feet, but it is meanwhile a desperate and usually bound-to-fail attempt to restore it. The case of a stuttering youth analysed and cured by François Dolto best exemplifies the significance of stuttering in Rick Moody's novel. The case narrated in *Séminaire de psychanalyse d'enfants 3* is the following: a seventeen-

¹⁹ "“Lord, open my breast,’ said Moses/ and do Thou ease for me my task,/unloose the knot upon my tongue, that they may understand my words.” *Koran* 20 : 26-29. In “the Kingdom of Righteousness”, “the stammering tongue will be fluent and clear” *Isaiah* 22. Children do not stammer when they're alone, sing or recite poems. They always stammer when they speak to ill-acquainted ou fearful persons. Van Hout & Etienne, *op.cit.*, p.16.

²⁰ Annie Anzieu notes that the stuttering child remains in a face-to-face relationship to the mother that excludes a positive third other.

year-old teenager has been stuttering since the age of two, since the day he heard his mother and aunt mock his father and fell off his chair. When he comes to see Dolto, he complains about his brutal father who still beats him up with a belt when he talks back. Dolto asks him according to the Ten Commandments to honor his father and behave as an honorable child who cannot be beaten up like a dog. She will not let him come back to therapy unless he stops his father by holding his wrists. After three weeks the boy comes back crying: he has behaved accordingly and seen his father kneel in front of him and kiss his feet crying. But the boy has stopped stammering²¹. Likewise Hex Raitliff's stammer is a reaction against as well as an identification to the hidden and subsequently dead father. The cure however only results from a counterreaction against this first identification following the other role-models provided by the construction workers who bear the word of God.

Ultimately, eating and drinking provide sensations which are akin to the flow of words and lack thereof. Wine in Moody's novel seems to play the same function as the speech defect: Hex is not only a stutterer but an alcoholic who stops stammering when he drinks, the speech impediment leaving place to the drinking problem and vice-versa. The relation between the two problems is not new. Shakespeare already compared stammering to pouring wine and literally a hidden man out of one's mouth in *As You Like It*: « I would thou couldst stammer, that thou mightest pour this concealed man out of thy mouth as wine comes out of a narrow-mouthed bottle; either too much or none at all » (III, 2, 195-199). It is also believed that Demosthenes was called 'Balatos' after the name of a poet who composed songs for drunkards and lustful verses. In Hex's case, drinking is a disease but following the French psychoanalyst Gerard Haddad's interpretation of the drinking problem, also an effort to cure. Haddad sees drinking as an attempt to recover from a « mysterious and unnamable sickness caught of 'not having eaten the Book' and acceded to the symbolic order²². Where Freud reads delirium not as a form of madness but as a struggle and attempt to recover from it, Haddad sees drinking as a reaction of those who failed in eating the book and will

²¹ Françoise Dolto, *Séminaire de psychanalyse d'enfants 3*, Paris, Le Seuil, 1988, pp. 115-122.

²² Gérard Haddad, *Les femmes et l'alcool*, Paris, Grasset, 2009, p.13. The concept of "eating the book" alludes to Ezekiel, 3: "So I opened my mouth, and He fed me this scroll. He said to me, 'Son of man, feed your stomach and fill your body with this scroll which I am giving you.' Then I ate it, and it was sweet as honey in my mouth."

never deliver a fully fluent speech. In relation to stuttering, Merry Levov's bulimia and subsequent anorexia play the same role as Hex's drinking problem. Each has 'a concealed man' within, an impeded Father, Phallus or Law, that not eating at all or drinking too much symptomize. Yes, like Freud's delirious patients who try to cure their madness in fantasies but rarely succeed, both literary characters stutter to repress speech but eventually kill themselves: Merry Levov dies and Hex Raitliff drowns in the polluted waters of Long Island Sound after an endless night of ebriety. The flipside, the only cure of those stuttering dramas are the novels. If Marx said that history stutters, the two stories fashioned by Roth and Moody are then the farcical repetitions of the two characters' stutter as a tragedy of speech.

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