

***blert* by Jordan Scott**

reviewed by ryan fitzpatrick

“We can only make ourselves understood (well or poorly) if we maintain a certain speed of delivery. We are like a cyclist or a film obliged to keep going so as to avoid falling or scratching. (Barthes, “Writers, Intellectuals, Teachers”, 379)

The easiest and most obvious way through Jordan Scott’s *blert* is to read it as if it were *about* Scott’s stutter. I wonder though if a reading that focuses too closely on Scott’s personal “struggle” or “battle” with stuttering would end up pat or easy, dealing too much with discussion of attempts to cure or ameliorate Scott’s own stutter. *blert* is deeper than this reductive reading. Instead of writing about the disfluencies in his own spoken language, Scott writes *through* his stutter, avoiding any written indicators of within-word speech disfluency (or any other typical textual representations of stuttering or stammering) in favour of a rewrite of language *as disfluency*. In his author’s note, Scott claims that “*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) and while the text seems more conflicted than this statement of purpose, *blert* is certainly a potent and explosive confrontation with the idea of “normative fluency” and the structures of logic and hierarchy that prop it up.

Early on, Scott insists that these poems come from a physical place – specifically the mouth, the throat, the tongue:

It is a 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)

blert quickly moves from the abstraction of figurative language to tongue-swelling rhythms built on words that are physically difficult to say. *blert* is “a text written to be as difficult as possible for me to read” (Scott, 64). The physicality of language is foregrounded here in an interesting way; where a more normative conception of communication would ignore language as a physical medium (language is invisible), a “poetics of the stutter” foregrounds that physicality, so that, for a writer like Scott who is so invested in language, being drawn to the beauty of a metaphor that could be “broken” by the apparatus of the mouth is a distinct possibility. For Scott then, a poetics of stuttering includes the excluded, meaning that the lexicon he uses throughout *blert* is composed of words that that might physically be difficult to say. *blert* is a sea of problem consonants echoing the kind of exercises mimicked in a piece like “Two Cheeseburgers, French Fries and a Coke”:

Twa, twaddle, Tweedledee, twas, twayblade, Tweedledum, twat, tweezers, twinkle-toed, twig, twelve gauge, twin-engined, Twix, twizzle ... zizz, zag,

Zohar, zone, Zola, zoo, zonked, zoot suit, two (45)

Built from specific problem sounds, the free association of words in a piece like this suggests a sort of training, of practice makes perfect, of a hopeful return to fluency.

This idea of a “return to fluency” or a “return to normalcy” is referenced continually throughout *blert*; early on in the book, we see a scene of stuttering in action – “Their thick tongues blort, eyes squeeze grief, a crowd / of huge unheard answers jam and rejoice” (9) – followed by a voice off camera asking “*What’s wrong?*” (9). This idea of “wrongness” – that somehow the stutterer is deficient in some way – affects our reading of *blert*. The stutterer is to be pitied or ridiculed, and the poems in *blert* show an acute awareness of these attitudes. The language in *blert* often resists a normative reading (which is why it is so tempting to resort to a reading of the book as a representation of the stutter), but a closer look reveals a text deeply engaged with not just the language excluded by Scott’s stutter, but with other vocabularies of exclusion. The stutterer is not quite human and might regain fluency in certain circumstances:

Some will not when by themselves.

Some will not when speaking to children or animals.

Some will not when they sing. (11)

The stutter disappears in examples of communication viewed as “simpler” or more “primitive”. This is the type of language used by other groups that aren’t at the centre of existing power structures (ie. non-white, non-male, non-hetero, etc) making the disfluent abnormal.

In the short series of poems “Valsalvas”, Scott complicates the theoretical notions around the stutter. The “Valsalva Maneuver” is a medical technique that involves an attempt to force air across a closed glottis; the three “Valsalvas” poems feature another “off-stage” or *fluent* voice (again in italics like other similar examples in the text) posing a question – “*What is the utterance?*” (11), “*What is the rhythm?*” (30), “*What is the syllable?*” (41) – that ponders the theoretical parameters of the language and the stutter; the answers, though semantically they don’t quite fit that bill, are visceral and biological:

Skookumchuck narrows, puckers waka waka against the rush of river. A haboob burst in your pharynx, technoed badunkadunk in zygomaticus major. The cochlear yawn centipedes tattletale in buckthorn orange. Each maxilliped bongos, fresh cornflakes suplex atop enamel. (41)

Scott’s choices here both defy and conform to language convention. Words still fall into recognizable syntactical structures, but often against their proper usage – something especially noticeable in the way Scott uses nouns, especially strange ones, as verbs (ie. “technoed,” “centipedes,” “bongos”). This play between proper and improper usage belies a desire on the part of the stutterer to “conquer” his disfluency – a desire erased

even as it stuttered into existence. Despite the meaning-defying diction, the sentences still look and sound *like sentences*. Here we see a tension between a desire for fluency (a desire to enter the language proper) and the physical difficulty of the speech act itself.

I think that it's important to remind ourselves that the poems in *blert* do not enact, represent, or simulate the stutter, but, rather, wade into the stutter using problem language as material. Scott interjects the lexicons associated with the stutter - everything from the "cures" referenced in the "Fable" series scattered throughout the book to scientific language about the mouth, tongue, teeth, and lungs to language itself - with other lexicons like the zoological or the consumerist:

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

A short condensed burst from one of the "Chomp Set" sequences in *blert*, we see little explicit content dealing with "the stutter", but the tone evokes the stutter in the way it relies on interruptions of content and repetitions of sound. Shared by the first two "Chomp Set" sequences, this clipped style recalls the statement at the beginning of each Chomp Set that "If you must have an idea, have a short term idea" (19). Ideas are interrupted in these poems as if the mouth clamps down on them, but Scott does not record the interruptions, only the shifts, leaving a language that is not stuttered but *stutteral*, meaning, I think, that like a guttural sound emerges from a certain place in the mouth, the *stutteral* emerges from a certain state of the mouth: a state of the mouth that, despite all appearances to the contrary, wants to communicate.

This desire for communication is crucial to an understanding of what is happening in Scott's text. Whether scientific, political, or commercial, Scott uses specialist language, jargon, and slang as examples of non-normative, non-everyday language in order to hopefully rethink what it means to communicate. Scott does not make logical or reasonable the disfluent, but, rather, complicates the very idea of fluency itself. *blert* attempts to crack open the disgust felt by those trying to normalize the disfluent; it is a bomb at the psychological gates of the phobic.

Works Cited:

Barthes, Roland. "Writers, Intellectuals, Teachers." *A Barthes Reader*. Ed. Susan Sontag. New York: Hill and Wang, 1998. 378-403.

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