Animals That Talk; or, Stutter

That Animals Talk

When I was a child, my favorite stutterer was Aesop. I was sure that Aesop had really existed.¹ My edition of his works made it plain that Aesop was handicapped both as to body and as to speech: he was born “most deformed” and “coulde not speke” (Caxton’s Aesop 1). (John Vanbrugh writes in his comedy Aesop [1697], “Esop [. . .] that piece of deformity! that monster! that crump!” ([Works 22]). The frankly esoteric quality of Aesop’s “animal fables” suggested to me that Aesop had a special need to speak with “forked tongue.” Some people told me that Aesop needed to “mask his [real] thoughts” because of his status as slave; the “Brer Rabbit” tales, they sometimes added, work in much the same way. I thought this need to “hold his tongue” was linked with Aesop’s speech impediment. The congruency between his political predicament (as a slave who could not speak his mind) and his linguistic condition (as a stutterer who could not speak well) led Aesop to invent the “talking animal” story. The Haitian exile and Paris-based neurologist Métellus says about his stuttering novel La Parole prisonnière [Speech Imprisoned] (1986), published just as Baby Doc was removed from power, that it allies censorship at the sociopathological level with stuttering at the psychological level: “After
writing *La Parole prisonnière* at the level of the state and conditions of Haitian political life, I [Métellus] described the conditions of living that interdict speech” (qtd. in Naudillon 144, my translation).²

Isaiah’s famous statement about divine hesitation in speech—“For with stammering lips and another tongue will [God] speak to this people” (28:11)—operates here as a gloss on the African-American slave writings that Hopkins and Cumming gather in their book *Cut Loose your Stammering Tongue* (1991). In any case, the “talking animal” genre allows human beings to speak ventriloquistically through dummy animals. Put otherwise, the “talking animal story” allows dumb animals to speak as if they were human.

In the history of the movies that was so much a part of my growing up in the 1950s, there are many real-seeming animals that seem to talk, as in the movie series *Francis the Talking Mule* (1940s and 1950s) and in the follow-up television series *Mister Ed* (1960s). There are also many unreal-seeming animals—cartoon animals—that have funny, humanoid speech impediments. But real animals don’t talk. It is true, of course, that many human beings talk to animals and also treat their supposedly dumb animals—their pets—as flesh-and-blood ventriloquists’ dummies that seem to speak back to them. (Nine-tenths of American pet-owners talk to their beloved “pet animals” as though they were human;³ half of these also put words into the mouths of their animals, just as if they were God opening the mouth of Balaam’s mule. Thus even James Russell Lowell endows his dog with the ability to speak.)⁴
But human beings who stutter do not stutter when they speak with (or to) real animals. To people who know traditional rhetoric, it comes as no surprise that the presence of dummy animals and dumb animals can help human stutterers. (Hence, pet therapy and hippotherapy are frequent speech treatments.) Nor is it unexpected that children's literature is replete with fictional talking animals that stutter. For example, a stuttering alligator is the main character in Stephen Cosgrove's *Creole*.

Real alligators do not quite talk; real parrots do talk—or seem to. Thus, Long John Silver's parrot in Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island* (1883)—and likewise the parrot in John Skelton's mysterious *Speke, Parrot* (c. 1521)—seem to have human speech but merely imitate the sounds of human language. (My first introduction to Stevenson's work was by way of a 1957 performance of *Treasure Island*; see Montrose Jonas Moses. This children's drama was written by Jules Eckert Goodman, an author already well known from *The Silent Voice*.) On the other hand, Polyanna in Hugh Lofting's *Dr. Dolittle* series (1920s) actually speaks human languages—including English. Polyanna also speaks hundreds of animal languages—including parrotese, which uniquely toes the line between the human and the animal. Many old-fashioned scholars used to claim that parrots—and the entire tribe of birds who imitate the human voice—are mere tape recorders without a speech of their own. For example, Max Müller argues in *Natural Religion* (1889) that “the parrot never speaks parrotese” (361). But Müller and his ilk never met the interspecies language teacher and elocutionist that is Polyanna. Nor, as I shall suggest, did they ever meet the zebra finch. (The tension between parrots imitating human speech and managing parrotese is especially enlightening in the case of such stuttering parrots in fiction as Robert Arthur’s *The Mystery of the Stuttering Parrot* [1964] and Leo Edwards's *Poppy Ott and the Stuttering Parrot* [1926].)

That fictional talking animals should stutter is already suggested by the English language, which has many words that mean both “for a human being to stutter” and “for an animal to make any sound.” A good case in point is the term *tattle*, which means not only “to stammer” and “to utter baby-talk” (like Marilyn Monroe) but also “to gabble” like a goose” (*OED*).
When I was coming up the speech ladder in the 1950s, questions of human speech impediments and of animal talk often went hand in hand. Rex Harrison, for example, who plays the technologically up-to-date phonetics professor in the 1964 film version of *My Fair Lady*, became equally associated in movies of the time with the animal-talk expert Dr. Dolittle, who, in the film of that name (1967), based on Lofting’s books, talks Solomonically with the animals. (Likewise, Julie Andrews, who played opposite Harrison as Professor Higgins’s perfect elocution student, Eliza Doolittle, in the 1956 stage-play version of *My Fair Lady*, became equally well known for her title role in the movie *Mary Poppins* [1964]. In *Mary Poppins*, Andrews specialized in tongue twisters like “Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious.”)

Judging from such works as *My Fair Lady* and *Dr. Dolittle*, the interrelated goals of elocution lessons would seem to be twofold: first, to teach some human beings (the stutterers) how to speak fluently and other human beings (those with “foreign” accents and “domestic” dialects) how to speak in more recognizably standard fashion; and second, to teach animals to talk like human beings. The scientist Irene Pepperberg thus teaches her parrot Alex to “talk.” Similarly, when Professor Higgins first meets Eliza at Covent Garden, he says that the sound that she produces—that is, that she makes and that makes her—is more like an animal than a human being.

But what if an animal has a speech impediment? In the popular culture of the twentieth century, in fact, there was a “feeling that all great cartoon characters had a speech impediment” (Wolf). The humanoid celluloid creatures whom I remember best from the 1950s are Gerald McBoing Boing (a sort of boy) and Porky Pig (a sort of little ham, or Hamlet).

Gerald McBoing, a boy who spoke with nonanimate sound effects, was the brainchild of tongue-twisting Dr. Seuss. Dr. Seuss’s script for the first *Gerald McBoing Boing* animated film (1951) consisted almost entirely of voice-overs and sound effects; Dr. Seuss used polysyllabic sound effects to fill out lines and rhyme. *Gerald McBoing Boing* was immensely popular: the 45 rpm record version (1950), the movie (1951), the book (1952) based on the movie, and the weekly TV show (1956–57) made him impossible to escape. Like my fellow young stutterers at the time, I recall being especially sensitive to how Dr. Seuss conjoined tongue-twisting “nonsense” with speech impediment—almost in imitation, as it seemed to me, of the stutterer Lewis Carroll, who called himself “Dodo.”
Carroll’s self-chosen bird name, Dodo, indicates a “stupid [... ]
person” (*OED*). The dodo bird was believed to be dim witted partly on
account of a clumsy body that did not allow this bird, which could not fly,
even to walk gracefully. The dodo could neither walk the talk nor talk
the walk.

Silent film, which was introduced to world culture around the
time of Carroll’s death in 1898, helped make once stationary images of
animals, including humans, seem perfectly mobile (“animated”). Even
so, the arrival on scene of talking film—“talkies”—in the 1920s helped the
mobile, but still mute, images of animals seem to talk fluently. So, Dodo
in wonderland could now both walk the walk and talk the talk—like the
gigantic parrot in Carroll’s *Sylvie and Bruno* (1889; 264).

**Talkies**

When you hear your favorite star sing
in the talkies, don’t be too sure of it.
—“The Truth about Voice Doubling,”
*Photoplay*, July 1929

The talkies of the 1920s cured the dumbness, or verbal paraly-
sis, of silent cinema. In much the same way, the moving photography of
the 1890s had cured still photography, or bodily paralysis. Technically
proficient means of synchronizing sound with moving film—including
“lip-synching” and the “speaking photoplay”—now allowed drawings and
photographs not only to walk but also to talk. Concomitantly, many early films depicted the cure of deafness and muteness in individual people. In such silent films as *Rimrock Jones* (1919) and *The Big Little Person* (1919), curing muteness and deafness was already the essential subject. One finds the same in *The Silent Voice* (1915) and *The Man Who Played God* (1922)—both based on Jules Eckert Goodman’s play *The Silent Voice*, in which a concert pianist goes deaf. The theme was long lived enough so that the film *Sincerely Yours* (1955), likewise based on Goodman’s play, was popular in Canada during the time I was making my way up the speech ladder.

An early subject of many talkies was, “What should we do now with those silent picture ‘stars’ who turn out to have no ‘stage voice’?” First: One might cure them of their speech “disability” by means of elocution lessons. The comedy *Once in a Lifetime* (1932) thus thematizes the transition from silent films to talkies. In this film—a source for *Singing in the Rain* (1952)—three New York vaudevillians working in 1929 are determined to get rich by teaching silent film stars to speak “properly.” They teach acceptable English-language accents and inflections of the same sort that non-anglophone immigrants and other nonstandard speakers in America were attempting.

Second: One might turn the screen stars into dummies, through whom others speak ventriloquistically or ekphrastically. Dubbing and lip-synching were the more or less secret “cures” for many film stars whose speaking or singing voices were found wanting. The advent of the talkies thus gave rise to deceptive ekphrasis—Who, really, is talking?

Third: One might dismiss the now voice-disabled, silent-screen star. This is what eventually happened to silent-screen star Lina Lamont (played by Jean Hagen) in *Singing in the Rain*. Lina wants people to believe that she talks as well as she walks. (So she has it put out that “Monumental Pictures [is] Wildly Enthusiastic Over Her Singing Pipes and Dancing Stems”). But Lina can’t make the transition to talkies, despite diction and elocution lessons. Her voice (“singing pipes”) does not measure up to her body (“dancing stems”). Lina’s lower-class New York accent and squeaky voice—reminiscent of Judy Holliday’s brilliant characterization of the not-so-dumb blonde Billie Dawn in George Cukor’s *Born Yesterday* (1950)—are not easily retrained. Unlike Eliza Doolittle in *My Fair Lady*, Lina cannot learn to talk right and she requires a voice-woman: Kathy Selden (played by Debbie Reynolds) both sings and talks—dubs and doubles—for her.

People discover the “dubbing” deception thanks to a performance on stage that might remind us of the revelation of the marvelous,
professorial Wizard in the *Wizard of Oz* (1939). Kathy takes over Lina’s role both on stage (as Don’s actor lover) and in reality (as Don’s real lover).

There is an irony in these films: the actors who play the “best spoken” women are themselves often dummies. The real Debbie Reynolds, whom film audiences believed to be the actual voice-woman Kathy Selden in *Singing in the Rain*, does not actually do the singing for Lina; Jean Hagen does. Similarly, the real Audrey Hepburn, who plays Eliza Doolittle in the film version of *My Fair Lady* (1964), does not do her own singing: Marni Nixon does. The “theme” of voice change and illusion in cinematography was often thus reproduced in “production.”

In *Singing in the Rain*, the diction coach or elocution teacher is more successful with Don Lockwood (Gene Kelley). Don does really well on the tongue-twister “Moses Supposes”:

> Moses supposes his toeses are roses
> But Moses supposes erroneously
> Moses he knowes his toeses aren’t roses
> As Moses supposes his toeses to be.

After all, the stutterer Moses also needs his voice-man: Aaron.

**Porky Pig**

Just how “animation” affected our understanding of animals that otherwise could not talk the walk or walk the talk is part of the culture in which children learn about speech. The early art of silent cartoon animation had been, in the first instance, a study of how animals (including human ones) move. Eadweard Muybridge had explored this in his photographic work, as in his turn-of-the-century serial photographs of moving horses and human cripples. (Edwin George Lutz’s *Animated Cartoons: How They Are Made: Their Origin and Development* [1920] gives more general guidelines for depicting anatomy and motion in the cartoons.)

The relevant early history of silent cartoon animation includes such silent animal cartoon characters in the 1920s and early 1930s as Winsor McCay’s *Gertie the Dinosaur*, Otto Messmer’s *Felix the Cat* series, and Walt Disney’s *Mickey Mouse*.

With the advent of the talkies, photographed animals, including human beings, not only walked, they now also talked. Here, finally, we had “the dumb ass [of Balaam] speaking with man’s voice”—as Saint Peter has the figure (2 Peter 2:16). In fact, the first sound cartoon ever
released was the animated talkie of Aesop’s fable called Dinner Time (1928). Soon after its success, Warner Brothers fell onto one of its most popular characters: Porky Pig.

During the 1950s, Porky Pig was the most celebrated of talking-animal stutterers. His “Th-th that’s all folks,” which Porky struggled to get out at the end of most of his cartoons, was made the subject of a pleasantly official U.S. postage stamp. (“That’s all, folks!” is also the inscription on the great voice actor Mel Blanc’s gravestone in the Hollywood Forever Cemetery.) Many prominent stuttering therapists still study Porky’s speech patterns—especially his habit of word substitution. It is as if the Porky Pig movies were actually documentaries about human stutterers (see Johnson).

(Stuttering doctors of the neurological sort are more especially interested in the ironic “Doc”—the speech-impeded dwarf in Walt Disney’s animated film Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs [1937; see Biran and Steiner].)

The first voice actor to play Porky was Joe Dougherty, who dubbed for the Pig during the early 1930s. Dougherty stuttered in real life (Blanc 65), and his film credits included The Jazz Singer (1927), one of the first talkies, where he was silent. Warner’s Leon Schlessinger fired Dougherty, presumably because it was expensive to have an actor who stutters when he does not want to (Blanc 66). The new voice-man was Mel Blanc, who was to become the most influential voice-man of all time.

Mel Blanc sought to re-present in his vocal representation of “Porky Pig” both an actual human speaker’s stutter (Dougherty) and an actual farm pig’s sound. English-speaking human beings parrot the sound as oink oink, a supposedly echoic term, although humans as such are nowhere near so multilingual in the human languages as Polyananna. (Frenchmen say groin groin, Vietnamese say ut-it, Welsh say soch, soch, Poles say chrum chrum, Albanians say hunk hunk, Japanese say buu buu, and so on.) In any case, Blanc went out to a pig farm and, in an early “method acting” tradition, tried to “become” a pig—indeed, seems to have believed that, in an essential way, he did become one. Blanc’s first voice-work for Warner brothers was Picador Porky (1937), in which Blanc also played the drunken bull—with a lazy Southern drawl punctuated by hiccups. (Eventually someone else played the role of the bull.) Hiccups—those “involuntary spasm[s] of the respiratory organs”—are like stutters (OED). Blanc picks up this similarity between hiccups and stutters in Barney Rub-
ble’s laughing hiccup in *The Flintstones* (Blanc 222). In some languages, in fact, the terms for “hiccup” and “stutter” are the same.15

Blanc, born Blank, grew up in Oregon in the 1910s in a Jewish family surrounded by a “a medley of foreign accents” (Blanc 5). Just such a medley Henry James had called the animal babbling of immigrant New York City. Blanc turned the chorus into a parliament of hundreds of speech-impeded animal voices. For the birds, his *Tweety the Bird* refrain, “I tawt I taw a puddy tat,” became a best-selling song. His avian Roadrunner’s “Mbeep-mbeep” traveled the world. His Woody Woodpecker was widely celebrated and imitated. Tweety Bird singing *I Tan’t Wait till Quithmuth Day* and Porky Pig trying unsuccessfully to sing *Blue Christmas* were holiday-time favorites. Sometimes it seemed to me, as I was on my way up the speech ladder in the 1950s, that the one dummy persona with a speech impediment whom “dub man” Blanc didn’t play was Moses.

Warner Brothers made a good deal of money from mocking people who did not speak standard English. Mexican immigrants and other Spanish-speaking Americans were outraged by the cartoon mouse Speedy Gonzalez (Blanc 66; 115–17); Blanc’s imitations of various Latin-American speech patterns led to civil rights demonstrations against his voice acting. French-speaking people in both France and Québec similarly balked at Blanc’s Pepe Le Pew, a skunk that stars in such cartoons as *Two Scents Worth* and has a strained French accent. Blanc produced similarly outrageous imitations of Native-American speech patterns (as on the Jack Benny Show of December 9, 1951) with very few complaints.

Stutterers were the only parodied group to keep altogether mum. Blanc’s impersonation of the stutterer in his version of Porky Pig singing *K-K-Katy* is, I believe, the most deeply humiliating parody of stuttering ever made in the English language. A close second would be Blanc’s performance in *Porky’s Poppa* (1958), also concerned with the unlikely situation in which a stutterer is unable to sing. Here, Porky plays back a recording he has made to the tune of the song *Old MacDonald*—one of those English-language ditties focused on the singing reproduction of animal sounds. Porky has a violent, rap-like, percussive reaction to hearing himself stutter; finally, he smashes both the record and the playback machine. Stutterers faced with Warner’s most popular and long-lived character did not complain about Porky until very recently."16

Stutterers’ relative acquiescence to parodies of stuttering and to depictions of it as an animal speech impediment was the result not only of the difficult and (little-studied) individual isolation that stuttering entails; it was also the sign of a certain reflective identification.
Birdsong and Speech

Do birdsong and the physical and intellectual capacities of some birds to sing provide a helpful model for understanding human stuttering and, along with that, human speech in general? Addressing this question, which serves to recall that stuttering is a pan-global and pan-cultural human phenomenon, properly depends, in the first place, on our carefully distinguishing between two kinds of musical “representation.” First, there is the representation of stuttering in songs, or in music-with-words. Examples would include popular music like *K-K-K-Katy* and opera like Mozart’s *The Magic Flute*. As we have seen, one problematic representational aspect of such works involves the condition that human stutters do not stutter when they sing. Second, there is the representation of stuttering in music-without-words. Examples would include Edgar Elgar’s brilliant *Dorabella Variation* (1899). (This is different from the representation of birdsong in music per se—as in Olivier Messaien’s lengthy *Livre du Saint Sacrement* for organ [1984] and Allesandro Poglietti’s *Rossignolo* for harpsichord [1677].)

In the most telling instances where music conveys human stuttering, the distinction between music with words and music without words seems almost to break down. One example occurs at a musical pinnacle of *The Magic Flute*. Here, the Queen of the Night, at the very top of her game, sings out an extraordinarily beautiful schwa-vowel melisma: “ah—ah—ah—ah—ah—ah—ah—ah—.” *Melisma* is musicology’s way of referring to the “prolongation of one syllable over a number of notes” (*OED*) in such a way that the word halts or repeats rap-like at the same time that the music flows. Compare how a speaking human might stutter on *Da*, as does “Loli-ta,” or “Aman-da,” or “Marilyn Monroe” in Norma Jean Mortenson’s performance of “My Heart Belongs to Daddy” in *Let’s Make Love* (1960); or appositely, consider how the feather-covered, birdcatcher Papageno and his bride-to-be Papagena stutter famously on *Pa* in their duet in *The Magic Flute*.

Papageno is, of course, a “bird man.” And even as thousands of real-life composers and songwriters imitate birdsong, so many songbirds imitate human speech. For example, there is the *da*—that is, the daw or jack-daw—that I consider elsewhere. But if we are to compare human airs with the melismatic catches of songbirds, we should probably first seek to dispel three unproven beliefs about human speech in relationship to birdsong.
First is the belief that laterality is a distinguishing characteristic of human beings. In fact, just as human speech, and human stuttering in particular, is related to cerebral laterality (most stutterers are left-handed), so bird-singing is related to the handedness of the bird’s syrinx, or lower larynx. Particularized lateralization among human children develops ontogenetically at around the time they are learning to speak; this fact may help explain why so many children (three to four percent) stumble in speech and then outgrow it when lateralization is fully developed. Those
children who do not fully lateralize are presumably, according to this view, the children who are the “real” stutterers (about one percent).  

Second is the view that avian soundmaking is usually innate, and when it is learned, that avian learning does not continue beyond physical maturity. In fact, some bird species learn their songs in infancy; like human children, they require tutors. Of these avian song-learners, some are “closed learners”: they keep the same song throughout their lives. Zebra finches are a good example. Among avian song-learners, there are also “open learners”: they forget old songs and learn new ones as the seasons pass. Examples are canaries and robins (See Doupe and Kuhl). Their ability to forget and learn probably involves neurogenesis. Since most scientists refused for decades to believe that neurogenesis was possible, they did not “us[e] birds [much] in scientific research” (Fernando Nottebohm qtd. in Specter 52). (It is worth recalling here that human stuttering is also related to gender: eighty percent of human stutterers are male. On the other hand, male canaries—the open learners—sing, and female canaries almost never do” [Specter 44].)  

Third is the remarkably wrongheaded prejudice that human beings are the only animals that stutter. Individual birds, in some species, stutter. (Hiawatha would know this: he served the stuttering legislator Dekawinda and “learned of every bird its language”—as Longfellow reminds us.) In fact, among zebra finches, for example, about seven percent stutter. Here, too, there is room for neurological research. Neurological investigation has already determined that the brains of stuttering human beings differ from those of nonstuttering human beings. Yet, important comparative questions remain: Do the brains of stuttering zebra finches differ from those of nonstuttering zebra finches? In what ways might the brains of stuttering human beings and stuttering zebra finches resemble each other?

Only now, then, are we ready to consider what the birds really say.
Many stutterers speak with what some people say are animal sounds. Thus, the stand-up stuttering comedian Patrick Campbell says that he stammers with a “muted gibbon cry.” Gibbons do have a remarkable cry; but birds are the animals that produce sounds in the way that humans do. “Our language has more in common with the singing and calling of birds, than with the vocal signals of apes,” argues Aitchison in *The Seeds of Speech*.

Just how to study the sound of birds is problematic. Some scholars of bird sounds as language focus on birds’ apparently weak conceptualizing ability. This is the partial error of Irene Pepperberg when she gives her parrot Alex elocution lessons and then reports on his relatively weak conceptualizing ability compared to that of dolphins and apes provided with prostheses like pegboards and keyboards. Pepperberg judges Alex’s speaking abilities not on his sounds and breathing, but on her own ability to judge Alex’s conceptualizing, as if a parrot were a human infant trying to speak out or an adult victim of Locked-In Syndrome. Her so quickly disassociating the concepts of sound-making from language—which is also a prejudice of much stuttering theory—tends to overlook how human language is linked with issues of anticipation in breathing and vocalization.

Another problem in studying bird sounds concerns the charge of mindless parroting—or sound-making without linguistic meaning. Birds of some species are indeed very good at imitating bird sounds of other species. (Mockingbirds—*Mimus polyglottos*—brilliantly mimic the notes of other birds.24 Much the same is true for sedge-warblers, butcher-birds, blackcaps, mocking-wrens, lyre-birds, parson-birds, bhim-rajs, and French mockingbirds, or thrashers [Knight]). This capacity has made talking birds, in human guise, extraordinary targets of put-downs and parodies in everyday speech, literature, and the cinema. On the one hand, we praise such a human dialectal elocutionist as Professor Henry Higgins in Shaw’s *Pygmalion* (1916) for his ability to parrot the sounds of other human
beings; on the other hand, we complain about human beings who merely patter, or “parrot” other people’s ideas, and similarly about animals who simply “ape” other creature’s gestures or imitate their sounds.  

Whatever the reason for our dispraising in animals what we often praise in ourselves, we appear anxiety ridden about any hint of veracity in the hypothesis that various animal-like cries or interjections (like oink oink and bow wow) are the natural and real beginnings of human speech. This is what Müller in the *Science of Language* (1861) called “the Interjectional, or Pooh-pooh, Theory” (Müller 352). Perhaps, too, there is some longstanding threat in the concomitant view that “human speech originated in the imitation of animal sounds”: the derogatorily named “bow-wow theory” (*oed*, “Bow wow”) seems to reduce the essentials of human language to barking instead of conceptualizing. Writes Jonathan Swift in *Traulus* (1750), “And though you hear him stut-tut-tut-ter, / He barks as fast as he can utter” (*Poems* 240).

Do animals ever stutter? We should here again distinguish both between real animals and fictional animals (for example, between a pig and Porky Pig) and between real animals that only seem to stutter and real animals that really do stutter. Real animals that only sound like they stutter would include the “stuttering frogs” of Australia. Many
apes seem likewise to stutter like human beings, as when chimpanzees “laugh.” Among humans, however, there is a highly developed thoracic respiratory control that underlies ability, on a single out breath, to create multiple strings of vocalizations accurately timed and synchronized with complex vocal tract movements. That capacity, absent from chimps, underlies such human singing as the stutter rap and the melisma (Provine, “Laughter” 40 and Laughter). If the chimp does not stutter, though, some zebra finches—crucially, as among human beings, not all—do.

Called “finches” because their call notes are represented in English-language speech as *spink spink* or *pink pink*,

the seven percent of zebra finches that stutter do so in the sense that they repeat syllables of song several times before continuing with their songs by altering syllables, deleting them, or inserting new syllables. Delayed auditory (DA) feedback in zebra finches produces song irregularities resembling human stuttering (Leonardo and Konishi 399, 466–70). These finches, which are otherwise “closed learners,” do not have parents that stutter, and they have highly individualized avoidance or substitution styles. (Their individual songs are not learned.)

That is to say, these particular finches use such sound-avoidance techniques, which apparently require reaction and self-consciousness, as might characterize particularly human speech. Stutterers such as myself immediately underst-underst-underst-

. . . recognize such strategies when we hear them in the field, the laboratory, and at home—zebra finches make excellent pets.

At the instant of substitution of one note for another—*re* for *st*—the human stutterer becomes bird-like, disregarding, almost completely, the longer term problems of “meaning” (“conceptualization”) that such substitution will entail later in the sentence. To all intents and purposes, the stutterer becomes a singer of musical notes. As for the bird-man, “Pa-pa-pa-pageno” in Mozart’s *The Magic Flute*, speaking as such is more anticipation of the next note than production or memory of its supposed conceptual meaning, which can always come afterwards, if at all. The example of the zebra finch thus helps in considering stuttering as an impediment involving anticipation of faltering in speaking and/or failure in breathing.

Charles Darwin, who came from a stuttering family, argued that “[p]rimeval man, or rather some early progenitor of man, probably first used his voice in producing true musical cadences, that is in singing” (35). And, in fact, since the eighteenth century, song has been linked to the
babbling and hesitant origins of speech. After all, the anatomical characteristics of the human vocal tract are more closely linked to our capacity to sing than to our capacity to speak. The stutterer knows this already, not only because singing increases subglottic air pressure in such a way that he can sing without stuttering (Rosenfield 124) but also because, as the work of Notker Balbulus (Notker the stutterer) demonstrated in the ninth century, bird-like melismata cross over into stuttering and usually cancel it out.

Stutterers do not stutter when they singsong melismatically, that is, by prolonging one syllable over a number of notes. And Notker long ago located stuttering within the traditions of ornithological melisma when he changed forever the melismatic sequences of the Gregorian Chants. In his day it was customary, where a Hallelujah was chanted in the Mass, to sing on the schwa-vowel "ah" a series of long elaborate melodic passages that prolonged this "ah". The result was often a distinctly bird-like sound. A good example of such singing informs The Magic Flute. On the one hand, this opera concerns humming. Humming involves "singing with closed lips without articulation." Its exemplar in The Magic Flute is the bird-man Papageno when his mouth is locked shut. (In E. B. White's book The Trumpet of the Swan [1970; movie 2001], a young trumpeter swan [cygnus buccinator], born mute, solves his analogous speech predicament by playing an actual trumpet.) Papageno's musicologically opposite number is, of course, the Queen of the Night. Her melismatic arias culminate in the representation of speech in music and music in speech—which representation is a principal formal goal of opera in general and the librettist's art in particular.

Notker claimed somewhat disingenuously that, in order to better retain in his memory the long wordless melodies of the Gregorian chants, he supplied them with words and notes. He set his new "sequences" so that each syllable corresponded to a single note: "[A]s many notes as there were in the music, so many words must there be in the text" (9). Notker introduced a new writing system for musicology that changed momentously the rules of the language game.

The Duck's Quack

In the movie Let's Make Love (1960), Milton Berle—alias The Thief of Bad Gags—claims that the extinct dodo bird is the funniest thing in the world. But so far as modern research can confirm it, the talking animal that is universally accepted across world cultures as the "funni-
“Best” is the duck. Thus, Richard Wiseman writes that “comparing scores for the same joke with different animals inserted in it, we found that the funniest [talking] animal of all is the duck.”

The most famous twentieth-century talking quacker is Donald Duck. Voice-man Clarence “Duck” Nash’s Donald has a special speech impediment for this talking animal. It is not stuttering—as in the case of Lewis Carroll’s dodo. Nor does it involve a lisp like Daffy Duck’s *dethpicable*, which voice-man Mel Blanc explains as the result of Daffy’s long mandible, or bill (95, 98). Rather, Donald Duck has a speech impediment closely tied to breathing. When he speaks, Donald utilizes the buccal airstream mechanism; he makes sounds by forcing air out by the muscles of the mouth.

Human languages, though, rarely use the buccal airstream mechanism. Most use the *pulmonary* airstream mechanism, which is either egressive (like most English today) or ingressive (like much Tsou in Taiwan). While stutterers often produce ingressive inhalation sounds—little whoops, crowing sounds, whimpering noises, and grunts accompanied by long and labored inspirations together with spasms of the glottis (Allbutt 7: 452)—inhalation therapy for stuttering relies on the observable phenomenon that many stutterers do not stutter on inhalation. Another breathing mechanism common to some human stutterers and cartoon animals involves the *velaric* airstream, which helps create a partial vacuum resulting in a bilabial *click* (“grandmother’s kiss”), a *tchick* for urging on a horse (a unilateral palatal click; also spelled ’*ts* and *tut*), or a *tisk-tisk* or *tsk-tsk* (“an exclamation of disapproval or irritation” *oed*). An old-fashioned treatment for stuttering combines pulmonary and velaric airstream breathing. On the one hand, the patient hums through the nose by means of the egressive pulmonary method. This entails “mak[ing] an inarticulate murmur in a pause of speaking, from hesitation, embarrassment, etc.” (*oed*, “hum”; consider here the stutterering implications of humming and hawing.) On the other hand, the patient produces, *at the same time*, a click by means of the velaric method. That, in short, is “the stutterer’s rap.”

Animal cartoonists of the twentieth century utilized these—and most all other—human breathing mechanisms for producing the sounds of language.

A favorite Donald Duck cartoon is *Cured Duck* (1945). Here the wise-quacking quacker cracks us up. Both humanoid and ornithic, cure-all ducky makes us laugh at his awkward canards. For now, though, the
best theory of stuttering—conceived in terms of ontogenetic or phylogenetic origin, targeted as a neuronal and motor event, linked with various breathing issues, and bound up with philosophies of voluntary and involuntary speaking—remains up in the air with the birds.

Marc Shell is Irving Babbitt Professor of Comparative Literature and Professor of English at Harvard University. His books include Art and Money (Chicago University Press, 1995), The End of Kinship: Measure for Measure, Incest, and the Ideal of Universal Siblinghood (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), and Children of the Earth: Literature, Politics, and Nationhood (Oxford University Press, 1993). Among other anthologies, he has coedited with Werner Sollers The Multilingual Anthology of American Literature: A Reader of Original Texts with English Translations (New York University Press, 2000), a product of The Longfellow Institute, of which he is co-director. His book Polio and Its Aftermaths is forthcoming with Harvard University Press (2004); another book, Stutter, is also forthcoming with the same press.

Notes

1 These days, I have my doubts. There are some writers who deny the existence of such a person as Aesop, and it is true that we have but scanty details of his life and work. Even his appearance is in dispute. According to a monk of Constantinople, Maximus Planudes, writing in the fourteenth century, Aesop was an ugly, deformed dwarf, and the famous marble statue at the Villa Albani in Rome shows him in this guise. But Plutarch, writing some 1,300 years earlier, says nothing about his appearance. Yet, the Athenians are said to have put up a noble statue in honor of Aesop.

2 From A. André Ntonfo, cited in Naudillon: “Après avoir donc décrit La Parole prisonnière sur le plan de l’état et des conditions de vie politique haïtienne, j’ai décrit les conditions de vie qui interdisent la parole.”

3 See Horn and Meer. This fraction does not include those who use animal training commands with “working animals.” Hearne, in “How to Say ‘Fetch!’” writes of her relationship to her dog Salty that “love, of course, is getting into things,” but does not define there the precise quality of her love or speech as trainer (12); see also her “Moral Transformation,” likewise written from the trainer’s viewpoint.

4 “My dog [. . .] looks up at me as who should say, ‘You are become unspeakable [cf. infantile] as one of us, poor old fellow!’” (2: 465).

5 On hippotherapy and stuttering, see Shell.

6 Cosgrove’s book, written for children ages five to nine, is about an alligator who stutters. “This story is a sweet, although superficial, moral tale about not judging someone by the way he or she looks. The story does not, however, address the issue of intolerance toward stuttering . . . an odd oversight in a book that is written mainly to discourage prejudice” (Bushey and Martin qtd. in Kuster, “Stuttering”). See, too, Armann og Blida by Kristin Steindottir (1994). “a book about Armann who is six years old and stutters, and his cat, Gentle. Originally written in Icelandic, Armann og Blida has been translated into English, and is available from the Stuttering Foundation of America” (Kuster, “Armann”).
7 In Low German, *tateln* indicates “to gabble, cackle (whence *tatelgos* gabbling goose.” See the etymology of “tattle” in the OED.

8 Wolf, who wrote the book on which *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?* was based, goes on to say: “Charlie [Fleischer] tried a lisp, a slosher, etc., and finally came up with the stuttered P. That wasn’t in my [original] book, but it works perfectly.”

9 An adaptation of the Moss Hart and George S. Kaufman play.

10 A little trivia: some complicated dubbing went on behind the scenes. Kathy was supposed to dub Lina’s singing voice, but that was sung not by Debbie Reynolds, but by someone else. And Kathy’s dubbing of Lina’s speaking voice was actually dubbed by—surprise!—Jean Hagen. Jean Hagen had more stage experience than Debbie Reynolds and was considered a better choice.

   *This merry mix-up of real life dubbing was addressed in Ray Hagen’s article on Jean Hagen in Film Fan Monthly (December 1968): “In the film, Debbie Reynolds has been hired to re-dub [Jean] Hagen’s dialogue and songs in the latter’s first talking picture. We see the process being done in a shot of Reynolds . . . matching her dialogue to Hagen’s and synchronizing it while watching a scene from the film. But the voice that is used to replace Hagen’s shrill, piercing one is not Reynolds’ but Hagen’s own quite lovely natural voice—meaning that Jean Hagen dubs Debbie Reynolds dubbing Jean Hagen! To further confuse matters, the voice we hear as Hagen mimes ‘Would You?’, supposedly supplied by Reynolds, is that of yet a third girl . . . [Betty Royce].” Confusing? Well, there’s more. Although Debbie sang in the movie, notably the title tune (dubbing Hagen!), Debbie herself is dubbed again by Betty Royce in her duet with Gene Kelly “You Are My Lucky Star.” (Wagner)


12 It also points to Moses’s painting Aaron’s toes red with the blood of a ram! Some might see here that there are two “Moseses” [sic] in opposition with each other: the one who supposes and the one who knowses; others, in discussing this “nursery rhyme” per se, point to Leviticus 22–24, where the “dummy” Moses, using the blood of a ram, paints red the toes of his “ventriloquist” brother Aaron.

13 Disney propaganda always does away with this film’s credit.

14 Porky Pig’s stuttering topography includes stuttering when he talks to animals.

15 The word for “stutter” in Jèrriais is *aheuq’ter*, which sounds like the French word *hoqueter*, meaning “to hiccup.” For the residents of the isle of Jersey, *aheuq’ter* perhaps means not only hiccuping but also stuttering. Stuttering and hiccupping would seem to have been thought of there as similar breathing disorders.

16 See Zimmerman and “Stutterers Object.”
A few once influential theorists of stuttering have claimed that certain cultures have no stuttering. See, for example, Johnson, “The Indians Have No Word for It.” That position has been disproven many times over, however—as by Stewart’s The Problem of Stuttering in Certain North American Indian Societies.

A set of initials or a nickname that refers to the acquaintance of Elgar’s whose personality is ostensibly suggested accompanies each variation in the Enigma Variations. The variations offer glimpses into Elgar’s relationships with several people. “Dorabella” (Variation 10) is probably named from a character in Mozart’s opera Così fan Tutte, but it was also Elgar’s nickname for his young acquaintance, Dora Penny. She had a stutter—to which, it is said, Elgar seems to allude with lilting interruptions in the woodwinds—like the one to which Don Alfonso alludes (in Mozart’s opera) when he delivers bad news to the sisters:

Vorrei dir, e cor non ho,
Balbittando il labbro va;
Fuor la voce uscir non puo,
Ma mi resta mezza qua.

How to break the awful news!
Stammer, stutter . . . it is no use.
Woe is me, my tongue is tied
And the words are stuck inside.

The mixophyes balbus, also called “Southern Barred Frog,” is indigenous to Australia.

See Shell ch. 5.

So demonstrates the work of Fernando Nottebohm. See Specter.

See Rosenfield, “Stuttering.” In fact, this is the old theory of Travis in Speech Pathology.

The ratio in various studies varies from about 2:1 to 4:1, according to Rosenfield (153).

Foundas et al. have argued that they do.

In his Account of New Zealand, William Yate writes of the “Tui”: “This remarkable bird, from the versatility of its talents for imitation, has by some been called ‘the Mocking Bird’” (2: 52).

See Wallace: “[T]he ‘monkeyism’ and ‘parrotism’ of those who indiscriminately adopted foreign manners and customs” (415). See, likewise, Edgeworth, when she laments that some people are “the mere puppets and parrots of fashion” (219).

According to the relevant studies by Rosenfield—Director of the Speech Motor Control Laboratory at Baylor College of Medicine—seven percent of the finches he has studied stutter in this way, and none of them had stuttering parents.

See friends, Zebravinken and The Zebra Finch: An Owners Guide.

See various works of Rousseau, Diderot, Rameau, and Condillac. For an early-twentieth-century argument, see Jespersen.

See Rock: “This drawing out of the notation for the Alleluia, they called the ‘sequence’” (5: 21).

Aldous Huxley writes in Island: A Novel about “long-drawn, almost bird-like melismata on a single vowel sound” (242).
Notker explained the origin of these sequences in the preface to his *Liber Ymnorum*, which gives evidence that he developed the sequences of his book under the influence of the antiphony of a monk of the Abbey of Jumièges. When I was yet young and could not always succeed in retaining in my memory the long-drawn melodies on the last syllable of the Hallelujah, I cast about in my mind for some method of making them easier to remember. Now it happened that a certain priest from Gimedia came to us who had an Antiphonarium, wherein were written some strophes to these melodies, but indeed by no means free from faults. This put it into my mind to compose others for myself after the same manner. I showed them to my teacher, Yso, whom they pleased on the whole, only he remarked, that as many notes as there were in the music, so many words must there be in the text. At this suggestion I went through my work again, and now Yso accepted it with full approbation, and gave the text to the boys to sing. (6–9)

For relevant information about Notker’s pertinent work, see Stevens and Yudkin.

Ekkehard, who wrote in the ninth century, says that Notker “was frail in body, though not in mind, a stammerer in voice but not in spirit” (18).

“So science has determined [says Wiseman], if you’re going to tell a talking animal joke, make it a duck” (qtd. in Friend 79). Wiseman is professor at the University of Hertsfordshire.

The *glottalic* airstream mechanism uses the glottal stop. Many polio survivors—who have a good deal of experience with enforced caesuras (as when in the iron lung) and with glossopharyngeal breathing (called “frog-breathing,” or “air-stacking”)—are quite good at speaking this way. There is also the *gastric* airstream mechanism, which utilizes air burped up from the stomach. See Shell.

**Works Cited**


