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A Hundred Tongues: George Darley's Stammer

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George Darley, the author of the following 'Epigram: On being rallied by a beautiful woman for dulness in conversation', had a severe and lifelong stammer.

> Ask me not thou, can I no thought afford
> Mirth to create or sadness to beguile:
> Thou smil'st so sweet ere I have spoke a word,
> Why should I speak a word to make thee smile? (Darley 1908, 452)

The point of these lines is ostensibly the neatness with which the speaker's 'dulness' is converted into fluent flattery, but their transparent allusion to the condition that habitually prevented Darley from speaking in company is probably a greater source of interest. Perhaps that interest is essentially voyeuristic, the unkind fascination of watching someone trying to pass off his embarrassment with a joke that only calls attention to it – but then voyeurism is one of the abiding concerns of Darley's work (Cronin, 99-100). The fluency of the poem's speaker is a fiction that flatters the poet more than his interlocutor: Darley's disability is evidently important at least to this slight little poem.

Here, I argue that Darley's stammer is of comparable significance to a more substantial work, his pastoral drama Sylvia; or, the May Queen of 1827. This likeable fantasia illustrates how disability could be drawn upon as artistic source material in the early nineteenth century. A fable of articulacy's triumph over vocal blockage, Sylvia became a way for Darley to explore what it meant to pursue artistic fulfilment. Hesitantly, and with defensive scepticism, he used the drama to put forward his stammer as a guide to his poetic

vocation. He did so under the influence of the treatment that he had undergone with the briefly celebrated speech therapist John Broster. Sylvia is in part a reimagining – and even a continuation – of the therapy that Darley underwent with Broster in 1825.

The importance of Broster's therapy for Darley's work has not previously been recognised. Instead, Darley's stammer has frequently been regarded as both a cause of and an irresistibly apt symbol for his self-confessed creative inadequacy and his failure to achieve an authoritative literary voice (Brisman, 125; Jack, 145; Lange and Burnett, 68; Storey, 25). Facile at best, the identification of disability with artistic ineptitude that has been so prominent in readings of his poetry must by now seem both patronising and ableist, as Michael Bradshaw has argued (2001, 99; see also St Pierre). But returning to the old question of the relationship between Darley's work and his stammer can still shed new light on that work, especially once it is recognised that Romantic-period stammering therapy often aimed specifically at harnessing artistic prowess, not just at the amelioration of failure. Darley seems to have believed that his experience of progressing from dysfluency to a fragile, artificial fluency of speech gave him a privileged insight into the craft of poetry.

In 1821, at the age of 26, Darley had left his native Ireland to try to join the London literary scene. Receiving some recognition as a promising poet and critic, he became part of the London Magazine circle that included Thomas Lovell Beddoes, John Clare, Thomas De Quincey, and Charles Lamb. His overpowering stammer, however, was notorious. 'My friend Darley', his publisher John Taylor wrote in February 1825,

> set off for Edinburgh last Thursday to see if a Mr Broster there can cure him of his Impediment. We had previously seen a gentleman to whom I obtained an introduction who was perfectly cured, and this heartened [?] poor Darley on to make the trial. Besides all the other expenses of the journey, & at least

> a fortnight's residence in Broster's house at 5 guineas a week, he must first pay 100£. whether the cure be successful or not. (Abbott 1928, 48)

Darley's biographers have agreed that this costly therapy was ineffective, and that 'whatever success Mr. Broster may have had with others, he failed with Darley':

> 'The remedy', says [B.W.] Procter, 'which appeared to consist in causing his pupils or patients to utter all their words in a sort of chant, produced no permanently good effect.' Had it done so the rest of Darley's life might have been very different. (Abbott 1928, 48)

Referring to a letter of November 1830, Anne Ridler writes that the therapy 'was useless – indeed, some years later [Darley] wrote to his friend Thomas Taylor that he felt himself rather worse than before' (Ridler, 15). Claude Abbott adds that on his return Darley made his 'last contribution' to the London Magazine, 'an unsigned sonnet in March 1825' (1928, 48). The London was the periodical in which Darley had met with the only successes of his career so far. If he departed from it just after his disappointed and impoverished return from Broster's therapy then the spring of 1825 must have been a gloomy watershed in his life.

In fact, things were different. In August 1825 the London carried a letter signed 'G.D.' that called 'Mr Broster's System for the cure of Impediments' 'the very best which the human imagination ever devised'. 'It is not always perfective, nor omnipotent, nor infallible', Darley writes there, 'for I […] am yet uncured, who have tried it. But it is generally effective, and powerful, and at least a probable remedy'. He finds his speech growing ever more fluent as it becomes ever easier to obey the precepts of Broster's system, and he is 'perfectly confident' that he will progress steadily to complete articulacy. Darley explains that the

essence of Broster's technique is a method of training the stammerer into a new way of speaking. He says that he will describe the system 'as far as is allowable', and he deals playfully with his duty of confidentiality as he asks the reader to suppose, as if only for illustrative purposes, that

> a certain given act requiring presence of mind were to be performed on every occasion of speaking, in order to facilitate speech; suppose the secret of the system to be of this kind, and suppose from the natural impetuosity, irresolution, or forgetfulness of the pupil's disposition, he is unable to collect that presence of mind which is imperative for the success of the system. (G.D., 533-35)

It is this 'presence of mind', Darley implies, that he lacks. Yet when Broster included this letter in a pamphlet of testimonials he brought out in 1826 and 1827, he added to it a postscript not found in the London in which Darley gave a fresh report: he was cured.

> Since writing the above, a continued perseverance in Mr Broster's System enables me to repeat my conviction of its efficacy—on the very best grounds, further experience, and further improvement in my power of speaking. The difficulty I complained of has almost vanished; and it is the good-nature of my friends alone, which reminds me that I had once a very disagreeable Impediment.
>
> G. D.
>
> December 19th, 1825. (Progress of the System, 11)

The first version of what became Sylvia had been a prose ghost story, 'Lilian of the Vale', that Darley published in the July 1824 issue of the London. Over the following years, he expanded the ghost story into a five-act 'lyrical drama' full of Shakespearean pastiche (see especially Bradshaw 2010). It was published in November 1827. In the same month, Darley applied unsuccessfully for the professorship of English at the new University of London. His decision to seek a job so ill-suited to a man silenced by a stammer has puzzled his biographers (see Abbott 1928, 66; Curran; Dingley). It must be the case that two years after his professed cure, he still believed that his hesitancy of speech was mostly a thing of the past. However, his letter to Henry Brougham applying for the professorship closed:

> Allow me to add that the difficulty of utterance which you noticed to my friend Dr. Lardner chiefly arose from the hurried nature of my conversation with you, and the awe which I could not help feeling, in the presence of one so much above me. I trust that the interviews I have had with several members of the council are sufficient to prove that this defect is so inconsiderable as to constitute no material objection. (quoted in Curran, 29)

Clearly Darley's voice still deserted him at the most crucial moments. Perhaps his cure had never been quite as complete as he wished to believe.

The story is completed by Darley's letter of November 1830, which is misrepresented by Ridler's paraphrase. Darley, writing to John (not Thomas) Taylor from France, tells him that speaking French

> has confirmed my relapse into almost total speechlessness. You are aware that I am not one of the most ready-witted persons in the world, and my

> confusion of brain was sadly augmented by a new language, mode of expression, manner of address, etc., etc.—so that I found myself shaken off my Brosterian stilts every moment. I am now somewhat worse I think than before my journey to Edinburgh. (Abbott 1940, 30)

Darley's 'Brosterian stilts' had evidently brought him a valuable period of increased fluency, and his 'relapse' by 1830 was a disappointment not attributed to a defect in the system itself. Nonetheless, his faith in the efficacy of the Brosterian system had ultimately proved ill-founded. His stammer lasted the rest of his life, contributing significantly to his enduring sense of loneliness. During the years when he conceived and wrote Sylvia, his struggles to follow Broster's system, and to maintain the necessary confidence in its good effects, must have been of paramount concern to him, while the drama's publication coincided with his most ambitious attempt – his application for the professorship – to dispel or repudiate what he called his 'hideous mask' (Abbott 1928, 151).

In later years, several writers claimed to reveal Broster's secret method. The only private record of Darley's experience is that preserved by B.W. Procter and referred to above: that Broster's patients were obliged 'to utter all their words in a sort of chant' (211). A contributor to the British Medical Journal in 1888 wrote that he 'met Jacky Broster, of Chester, in the year 1832 or 1833, and his secret was simply teaching his pupils to say 'er' the 'r' soft before each word. He was an auctioneer, and did not understand the theory of his practice. He was invariably successful, and charged a fee of three hundred guineas, and exacted a bond of secrecy' ('Stammering', 55). This 'secret' was in fact a widely recommended treatment in the 1830s, invariably credited to the physician Neil Arnott, who believed that it prevented the spasmodic closure of the glottis by which stammering was caused. Samuel Potter thought that Broster's 'trick' was the one popularised by a Mrs Leigh:

‘raising the tip of the tongue to the palate, and holding it there while speaking’ (46-47). Another story was that

> Broster’s own elocutionary activities began after he had acquired a ‘great secret’ from a fellow actor, the notable tragedian, George Frederick Cooke. [...] This turned out to be nothing more than the habit of always breathing through the nose, but when Broster returned to England he was able to charge highly for this information and became a rich man. (Rockey 1979, 159)

Earlier, Tyler Smith, who regarded Broster as ‘one of the most successful curers of stammering in this country’, had declared:

> Rhythm was the means employed so successfully by the celebrated Thelwall, and afterwards by Mr. Broster, who both kept it a profound secret. […] If any reader has ever perused the glowing annual reports of the wonders effected by the Brosterian system, as it was termed, which undoubtedly did effect a large number of cures, the accounts of which were veiled in most mysterious language, it will be understood in a moment, when the word rhythm is mentioned, that this is the enchanter’s wand, the true solution of the Brosterian enigma. (Smith, 36, 54)[1]

Possibly each account reflects one part of Broster’s system. In Darley’s London Magazine description, ‘the grand secret’ of Broster’s method was not any one of the numerous individual techniques that the therapist employed, but ‘how, when, and to whom to apply

them'. Another testimonial, originally printed in *Blackwood's Magazine* in December 1825 as a note appended to a poem, 'Lines Addressed to John Broster, F.A.S.E.', reports that:

> When I first became acquainted with the most prominent feature of Mr B.'s System, I was much disappointed in it—I mistook it for a simple elocutionary process. But, in fact, this prominent feature is only simple in principle; if rightly and pertinaciously adhered to, it is in practice omnipotent. Moreover, it owes nothing to elocution; but is a perfectly original discovery. ('Lines', 731)[2]

In fact, this author adds, all good orators 'must be in possession of Mr B.'s system', whether by instinct or by training.

The specifics of the various conflicting claims to reveal Broster's secret are perhaps less important than their implicit agreement on the school of therapy to which he adhered. Although the *Blackwood's* author puffs Broster's method as a 'perfectly original discovery', he also says it looks like an 'elocutionary process' of speech correction, which agrees with what Smith and all the other sources suggest. Darley was apparently taught to control his stammer by what was in effect an elocutionary method. If so, then his therapy would almost certainly have given a key role to the reading of poetry. In that case Sylvia itself may be interpreted as an elaboration of the very project that began in Broster's treatment rooms. The adventure of Sylvia's hero Romanzo is both an allegory of Darley's self-healing and a stage of the Brosterian healing process itself.

Treatment for stammering in the early nineteenth century was ill-regulated and speculative, lacking established precepts or an institutional basis. The most stable characteristic of the

field was the dissension between those who saw stuttering as a medical condition and those who treated it as a type of verbal imperfection. ‘If stuttering had some organic or physiological basis, then speech correction should form a new medical specialty. If the problem was primarily a bad habit or vice, then re-education was required.’ So physicians competed for market share against ‘orators, actors and orthoepists’, clergymen and singing teachers (Rockey 1980, 64, 48; see also Hoegaerts, and on the evolving medical status of disability, see Turner). Medical men typically accused elocutionists of ignorance and charlatanism, and were accused in turn of arrogance and a lack of sympathy. For Joseph Poett, elocutionists’ ‘mode of removing Impediments in Speech [could] only be beneficial in cases where the affection depend[ed] on a simple irregularity of enunciation,—the nervous system being free from either excitement or debility’; otherwise, once the patient had left their charismatic presence, relapse was ‘immediate’ (62-64). G. F. Urling regarded Broster as one of ‘the most successful of these mystics’ who profess ‘secret modes of curing stammering’ which prove to be unreliable and extremely expensive (3-6). Yet the highly respectable Arnott readily acknowledged ‘the frequent success of non-professional, and often ignorant individuals’ in curing stammers, ‘by a mode of treatment which they solemnly bind their patients not to divulge’ (595).

1840 and 1841 saw a wild and short-lived fashion for surgical operations on stammerers. Johann Dieffenbach cut deep vertical wedges from the back of the tongue; James Yearsley removed the tonsils or uvula (Dieffenbach; Stevenson; Yearsley). When Darley sought treatment fifteen years earlier, however, the techniques employed by the medical and elocutionary schools were less strikingly different than their rhetoric. The various methods attributed to Broster are typical. The other technique most frequently cited was first proposed by Henry McCormac, who thought that stammerers tried to speak with empty lungs and advised breathing forcefully in and out. Others suggested whispering, clenched teeth,

watching oneself in a mirror, and long hours of vocal tuition. Medical men themselves endorsed speech training programmes like these. Their concern with physical debility and organic malformation, however, meant that they put greater emphasis on 'tonics' and general exercise to 'produce a free and uniform circulation' (Hartley, 56), and 'medicinal treatment' to restore 'nervous energy' (Poett, 80).

The leading light of the early nineteenth-century elocutionary movement is better remembered for other activities. It was the poet and former radical orator John Thelwall who did most to conceptualise the treatment of stuttering within the framework of oratory and rhetoric. Regarding impediments as 'primarily moral and mental' rather than physical in origin, he could argue 'that elocution deserve[d] to be a discrete theoretical and practical discipline with its own specialised practitioners distinct from those in the field of medicine' (Duchan 2010, 194; see also Duchan 2009). The elocutionists' aims were idealistic rather than remedial. Their ultimate goal was not merely the restoration of patients to commonplace good health: they sought to produce rhetoricians capable of compelling speechcraft, or 'vocal athletæ […] as remarkable for their power, accuracy, beauty, and richness of voice and enunciation, as are the athletæ of a system of Myolgic gymnastics, for their power and accuracy of muscular motion' (Cull, 46). Thelwall's residential school of elocution was dedicated to 'a vision of unhindered, undistorted public communication' that sought to 'equip hitherto marginalised and disempowered subjects for active public life' (McCann, 218, 223). He believed that 'all impediments are best surmounted (even in what relates to the primary requisites of facility and intelligibleness) by aiming at the highest graces of rhetorical emphasis and harmonic inflection' (Thelwall 1810, 227). On this view, impaired speech was not simply an individual affliction that required medical intervention. The troubles that it caused were a characteristic feature of a social structure within which many voices were

wilfully restricted or left unheard, and the emancipation of stutterers' voices might be best accomplished as part of a much larger reconfiguration of the body politic.

Thanks partly to Thelwall, Darley underwent stammering therapy at a time when speech correction was intimately associated with the art of poetry. In Poett's complaint that 'several persons consider prosodical instruction calculated to remove the affection [of stuttering], and rely on an elocutionary mode of cure' (63-65), 'elocutionary' and 'prosodical' methods sound almost synonymous. Introductions to elocutionary systems often insist that mastering the recitation of verse is a powerful means of curing hesitation of speech. The process typically involves first learning to recite poetry in an exaggerated sing-song – or, as Procter remembered, 'a sort of chant' – and then advancing to a more fluent delivery before attempting to speak prose in a similarly measured and methodical fashion. Just as Sylvia progresses within scenes from rhymed tetrameter stage directions, through intricate opening songs, to blank verse and prose, so James Wright recommended that stammerers should first practise speaking 'passages of written composition, in verse whose rhyme is regular'; next, 'poetry of a more complicated character'; and then prose (39-40). It was from his intuition of the elementary principles underlying Dryden's prosody, as he was engaged in planning a poem of his own, that Thelwall's system arose. Mastery of those principles would, 'at the same time, loose the tongue of the stammerer, and enable the literary student to command, and the critic to comprehend, with certainty, the genuine sources of grace and mellifluence' (Thelwall 1810, 4):

> He who would surmount an impediment, or emancipate himself from any troublesome imperfection of utterance [...] should aim at a practical precision, a richness and energy of cadence, that might do justice to the noblest effusions of eloquence and poetry: for it is not by the adoption of

> affected and offensive peculiarities, that impediments are effectually to be surmounted; but by comprehending and cultivating the highest graces and accomplishments of human utterance. (Thelwall 1812, xi)

Even physicians shared Thelwall's belief that there was an intimate connection between great poetry and the overcoming of a stutter. 'One of the worst stutterers I have ever known, was one of the best readers of Milton's Paradise Lost', recalled John Mason Good. 'The moment an interesting poem was opened, his defect completely vanished, from his being led captive by the force of the subject, and the great interest he took in this branch of polite letters' (1: 493). Crippled speech could be made into a medium for the pursuit of linguistic virtuosity; for Tyler Smith, rhythm was the only key.

> The stammerer who is counting (and there are few stammerers who cannot count), and the orator or actor whose delivery is characterised by exact rhetorical grace, are carrying precisely the same law into effect, however humble the one effort may seem by contrast with the other. The first is, so to speak, illustrating the alphabet of rhythm, the second its finished language. (Smith, 60)

Whether or not the 'act requiring presence of mind' that brought Darley several years of partial relief from his impediment involved the 'application of Rhythm', 'saying "er,"' or breathing through his nose, he must have been familiar with views like these. Elocutionary therapy would have suggested to him that his condition had a special affinity with the practice of poetry, and that its resolution depended specifically upon the pursuit of rhetorical éclat. For this reason, the worries and hopes focused by Brosterian therapy are visible in the

text that Darley produced whilst under the influence of that therapy. If Broster's remedy sought to inculcate – probably in part through the recitation of verse – the harmony that underpinned an oratorical ideal, then it is not surprising that the treatment itself should have found utterance in poetry.

Sylvia's plot could hardly be less substantial. Romanzo wanders into a valley inhabited on one side by blithe fairies, the widow Agatha, and her daughter Sylvia, and on the other by a crew of demons. While he and Sylvia fall in love, the demons entrap his servant Andrea as part of a conspiracy to carry Sylvia off for their king's pleasure. The arrival of a troop of rustics complicates their elaborate if petty stratagems; they eventually capture the maiden, but they are annihilated in battle by the fairies, and all ends happily. The fairy realm is a locus amoenus of unrestrained verbal fluency, whereas the land of the demons is characterised by choking obstruction. Romanzo himself represents, in part, a successful Brosterian patient.

In 'Lilian of the Vale', the version of the story that Darley wrote before his lessons with Broster, the narrator had retreated from a busy life of 'academical studies' to an Arcadia inhabited only by the spirit girl Lilian and her mother. Lilian 'spoke little; expressing herself mostly by gestures or inarticulate modulations of voice' (5, 10; rpt. in Darley 1826, 295, 312). Inside her valley of unspeaking mystery, the narrator had found his worldly words excessive and unnecessary. Sylvia reverses this scenario: it is the traveller who comes from a realm of silence, and the magical glen that teaches him volubility. The drama begins with Romanzo's arrival in the valley, and as the euphoric reinvention of his voice gets underway he describes a birdlike weightlessness and an ecstatic compulsion to speak out:

Even I

Could smile, who have not smiled since I could feel.

The melancholy God loves me no more;
My spirit bursts forth in song (Joy's eloquence)
And like yon tremulous nursling of the air,
Perch'd on and piping from a silver cloud,
I cannot choose but pour my strain of praise
To this most beautiful glen. (Darley 1827, 4)

We learn nothing more about the suffocating affection with which the 'melancholy God' had dammed up the traveller's eloquence, but the valley is understood to be a place of relief from a traumatic past. 'If there be peace on Earth', Romanzo sighs, ''tis in thy breast!' He calls upon his surroundings to rework his voice and make it good. 'Beautiful Glen of sweet groves and sweet bowers! / My voice is unworthy to praise thee alone'; instead,

let the song of a Rover
Awake the sweet Echo that lies on thy hill;
Let her say what I say of thy beauty twice over,
And still as I praise let her mimic me still. (5)

Agatha has noticed that the echo 'is loud in this place' (8), but Romanzo experiences something more. A voice (the fairy Nephon's) sings his own words back at him, and so brings into being the chorus of 'sweet birds' and the 'vocal' chthonic 'Spirit' that he had fancifully invoked. 'Never before', Romanzo marvels, 'Came syllables from Echo's faltering tongue / So exquisitely clear' (5). 'Who art thou?' he calls out to the guarantor of his new oral prowess. 'Perhaps what thou art!' is the reply (6). Romanzo's 'faltering tongue' is harmonised and remodelled by a teacher whose abilities he is then invited to internalise.

A more direct homage to the Brosterian system is also at work. Darley must have known the 'Lines Addressed to John Broster' that *Blackwood's* printed in 1825, the notes to which Broster included in his advertising pamphlet. This poem concerns a 'pilgrim' walking on Arthur's Seat, near Edinburgh – 'a bright, rich, fairy scene'. On his first visit, he had despaired of his speech impediment, but on climbing the hill again after a month of therapy with Broster,

> the stranger gazed on the fairy beam,
> Like one escaped from a painful dream;—
> The fever had pass'd away; his tongue
> Was released from the spell that around it clung.
> He called upon Echo—I saw him rejoice,
> As Echo replied with unbroken voice. ('Lines', 730)

Darley recapitulates this scenario of an address to Echo in a mountainous fairyland, and as he does so the original paean to Broster echoes through Sylvia, 'exquisitely clear'. The story that Broster's technique involved 'the habit of always breathing through the nose' might even explain, if it is accurate, another characteristic of Nephon's voice: we learn later that Romanzo's teacher 'sings [...] a little through his nose' (52). Romanzo passes on from the encounter with him in fearful hope, 'As the poor swimmer dives for a jewel at the bottom of the perilous gulf [...] seek[ing his] fortune in the depths of this mystery' (7). He awakes the next morning in joy: 'It is true! It is true! [...] No! my senses could not so far deceive me!—O how I feared, on waking, to find all that had passed, a dream!' (18).

Like her precursor Lilian, it is 'hard to get' Sylvia 'to speak without singing' (19), but now the shift from talk to song is an intensification of loquacity rather than an escape from it,

and Romanzo's pleasure comes from sharing in her fluency. The fairy valley bestows upon him its gift of tongues, its chattering mellifluence. Sylvia is above all a pastoral of the voice:

> As if the tremulous leaves were tongues,
> Millions of voices, sounds, and songs,
> Breathe from the aching trees that sigh,
> Near sick of their own melody. (10)

'Millions of chaplets curl unweft / From boughs, beseeching to be reft', among 'deep enquiring lanes' (9). Aspen has a 'leafy tongue' (116). In this environment, the urge to speak and to hear can become frenetic. 'The voice! the lovely voice!—Show thyself, chantress! lest I go mad with expectation!' Romanzo gasps as Sylvia approaches for the first time (20). She too can get carried away. She apologises for leaving the pursuing Romanzo out of breath:

> the music that I hear
> Makes me dance onward like the thistledown
> Timing its gait to the wind's eloquence. (43)

'Why do I feel such pain to hear you speak?' she asks him, before promising that they 'will spend an hour of rapturous talk— / And gaze—and talk' together (43-44).

From the birds' 'morning din' (21) to water that falls 'hoarse-cadent' or 'With gentle wail' (45), voices are heightened as sound and sounds invested with voice. Romanzo concludes that 'The mountain air / Sweetens [his voice's] tone' (44), and grows emboldened to demand his first kiss from Sylvia in exchange for replacing the 'soft discoursing way' of the winds and 'Heav'n's starry talk' with human words of love (164). While the lovers court,

the narrator descants on the euphony of words like ‘Love’ (‘So soft, the lips will scarcely meet’), ‘Rose’, and ‘Lily’ (66-67). Hearing too is celebrated, and the poetics of littleness that Leslie Brisman identified as the mainspring of Darley’s work here manifests itself in attentiveness to the tiniest of noises, to ‘the crystal sound of wells, / Betrampled by the sparkling rain’ (84).

Just as the fairy kingdom is fluid, alert, and vocalic, so that of the devils is marked by blockage and stalling, by creaking bodies with heavy tongues. Underfoot, ‘inward thunders lift the ground’ (25): the suffocation of breath is geographic in scale. The demon-king’s castle is a conglomerate of ‘yawning jambs’ (61) and portals that will ‘scarce open […] Their slothful jaws for their own king’ (171). ‘Silence, curst demons!’ are his first words: ‘Listen to me, or / I’ll strike ye dumb as logs!’ – although soon he is railing at their muteness (26-27). ‘Never open thy mouth but to eat thy porridge’, Momiel tells Grumiel (192), whom he disguises as a drinking-fountain to bait a trap for Romanzo. Twisted and ‘stiffen[ed] into metal’, Grumiel’s pose makes manifest the choked and implacable vocal system that is the devils’ psychic source (58). The centrepiece of the valley’s geography carries a still more vivid symbolism. This is the ‘demon line’ (189), the border between the fairies’ and devils’ dominions that is no obstacle at all to the former, but to the latter a maddening and impregnable – although, until actually experienced, imperceptible – impediment. ‘Feel here’, says Grumiel:

> a sightless plane
> Of glass stands like a crystal wall, as high
> As bridgy Heav’n: ’tis thinner than blown soap,
> Yet strong as adamant to smoky natures
> Like thine and mine: this is the jealous pale

And limit of our realm. We cannot pierce it

Without a spell. (48)

This opposition between fairy fluency and demonic congestion runs throughout the poem, but it increasingly becomes complicated by another kind of speech. The greatest danger to the fairy equilibrium of fluency is posed by ultra-articulate talk that outruns good sense, emanating principally from Romanzo's manservant Andrea. Andrea is a 'mimmering driveller' (64) who – under the influence of demonic potions – switches between magniloquent balderdash and hopeless entanglement in energetic mis-speaking. His circumlocutions and malapropisms associate him with the predicament of the stutterer who is able to speak only by means of the continual substitution of new words for those that will not come on to the tongue. 'My words come out pip! pip! like bullets from a potgun', he declares (166).

Andrea's likely origin is the anxiety that led Darley to make the same joke three times in his London Magazine letter on the Brosterian system. First, of the twelve patients he knows about, 'three are nearly as eloquent now as their friends, and three nearly as tongue-tied as their enemies could wish them', he writes. Second, 'no one […] but a perfect fool could forget the System; and the sooner he forgets it the better. We have plenty of fluent folly already in the world'. And finally: 'I shall ultimately be able to speak as fast and as fluently as I can scribble: more than sufficient for my hearer's satisfaction, perhaps' (1825, 534-35). It seems that his own exclusion from easy speech made the fastidious, sceptical Darley wonder whether most of those who talk freely really deserve to be able to do so. The articulacy so valuable to him was squandered and debased by those who possessed it. His repeated dry undercutting of the idea that resolving a stammer is always a good thing emphasises that his ideal of fluency was not about unrestricted talking, but – in accordance with the elocutionary

project – about a better control of all the elements of speech. Andrea and the rustic Geronymo are absurd archetypes of 'fluent folly', of speakers who cannot control their words. They belong outside the valley, and their heavy, human 'speech-speaking' (1827, 60), the opposite of the fairies' light effusiveness, seems on one level intended to sharpen readers' sense of the latter's value.

This opposition between fairy eloquence and human verbosity ought to be a sharp one: for fairies, 'Ev'n to be heard or seen at all' by humankind 'Is held a crime most capital' (149). Yet Sylvia repeatedly undermines its own distinction between 'fools' and adepts. The fairies persistently bring themselves close to Andrea and Geronymo, alluring them, arguing with them, even impersonating them (129). The pair are themselves not just incompetent foils for Romanzo's and the fairies' lucidity but energetic and destabilising parodic counter-voices. Thus, the fairies' aural acuity is warped memorably into the sprouting of Andrea's enormous ears. 'No! these, indeed, are something like ears!' he announces, deaf to the horror of those with mere 'apologies for sound-catchers': 'these are respectable hearing-leathers!' (96). Geronymo's complaint that 'an indivisible singing-bird' – a fairy – led him to Sylvia's cottage through 'numberless out-o'-the-way short-cuts, and straight-forward roundabouts' (101) might sound like a description merely of his own mental convolutions, or instead like a plausible topography for a fairyland that is finally just an assemblage of enjoyable diversions.

Andrea's most emphatic challenge to the purity of Sylvia's pastoral diction is his most direct. Grown 'wondrous 'rithmetical' in his taste for 'numbers', he attempts a song in 'the lambkin style of farcification'. The slippage of the poem's pastoral into grotesquerie is strangely compelling:

> My dappled goats do pipe to me
> From Night to hairy Morn.

> The fragrant goats sing faa-laa,
>
> The shepherd he goes maa-aa! (87)

Romanzo, 'King of Shepherds' (24), is here condemned by his immersion in the valley to a mere reiteration of its characteristic notes. If Andrea's and Geronymo's function in Sylvia's Brosterian drama is to express the differences in value and cogency possible within unimpeded speech in terms of a difference between elfin and clownish language, their 'farcification' of the fairy ideal also serves to complicate that demarcation.

Darley's admission, quoted above, that his Brosterian experiment had failed definitively was introduced by a despondent self-description:

> Something like Fame my head is always in the clouds tho my feet are on earth—but unlike Fame in this, that she has a hundred tongues while I have but half of one. French has confirmed my relapse into almost total speechlessness… (Abbott 1940, 30)

Sylvia was 'the one wholehearted attempt by Darley to secure public recognition as a poet', a recognition 'for which he strove with almost morbid anxiety' (Cronin, 98; King, 214). Fame, with her hundred tongues that utter a compelling verdict on a poet's achievement, is the supreme type of the fluent speaker that Sylvia idealises. Darley seeks her through his text both in practice and by analogy. Romanzo's wooing of Sylvia is in part an allegory of the courtship of Fame, one that becomes explicit when she expresses her acceptance of him: 'Come, bend me thy brow, gentle youth! and I'll twine / Round thy temples so pure this rich garland of mine' (70). His pursuit of her parallels closely the narrator's pursuit of Hymné,

‘fast fleeting like a noiseless stream’, in the hope of a ‘wreath’ or ‘crown of glory’ (204-5). Darley’s preface to the poem describes his ‘most unfeigned’ (vii) hope that it will please a popular audience, and its failure in that respect still felt fresh at least twelve years later. ‘It ranked me among the small poets’, he complained. ‘I had as soon be ranked among the piping bullfinches’ (Abbott 1928, 224). One of the poem’s favourite tropes, the anthropomorphised voice of a songbird, returns here freighted with despair. Sylvia’s failure to achieve for Darley the literary fame that was allegorised by Romanzo’s quest prompts him to an ironic reprise of the poem’s typical content, now seen as inadequate and abortive.

Yet this does not mean that we should read Darley’s subsequent status as a ‘minor’ poet back into Sylvia, and once again make the argument that his vocal dysfunction naturalises his ultimate lack of success. This narrative of defeat is pre-empted by his optimistic self-mythologisation, whereby his stammer initiates the therapeutic encounters that provide him with a model for the realisation of an enduring poetic voice. Marc Shell’s cultural history of stuttering finds connections between the stammerer’s compulsive echoes or reduplications and the art of the pun. The need for synonyms and periphrases with which to evade blockages drives verbal inventiveness and can leave stammerers with precociously large vocabularies. Fluency and dysfluency are not simple opposites but subterraneously linked, ‘so speech impediment becomes literary art, or vice versa’ (Shell, 49). Unlike, for instance, Elizabeth Inchbald or Charles Lamb, two writers among many who have drawn creatively on their stammers in developing their prose style (Bobrick; Codr), Darley never appears to have regarded his uncured stammer as a likely wellspring of artistic achievement. Nonetheless, his Brosterian drama finds creative possibility in the experience of moving from blockage to articulacy, under the guidance of a therapeutic method that sought out – as Thelwall put it – ‘the highest graces and accomplishments of human utterance’.

In the view implied by Darley's text, verbal impairment is not just a derogation from a normal state that the stutterer can only aspire to rejoin. Infelicities of speech come in many different forms, and the self-consciousness associated with the act of stuttering can become a spur to adopt distinctive and rewarding new ways of speaking and thinking. 'She has a hundred tongues': 'What! more than one tongue apiece?—O monstrous!' Andrea would say (208), but Fame's multiple (and hence self-echoing, self-certifying) voice of acclamation is the only one that can finally return to Darley his possession of his own voice. Romanzo's union with Sylvia, along with the destruction of the demons and the partial neutralisation of Andrea and Geronymo by their marriages to women who will 'stand sentinel over [their] volatility' (213), describes the fulfilment of the Brosterian promise of heightened control over the performance of speech. When the poem was published to little notice, and when Darley's stammer helped to ensure that the University of London professorship would be awarded elsewhere, it became impossible to sustain this dream into real life. Yet in Sylvia itself, Darley's stammer had already become a way of thinking through creative difference, or even the guarantee of a treasured exceptionality. His stammer carries him outside the routine processes of 'speech-speaking', and it is precisely the separation and self-consciousness induced by disability that allow him entrance to the hidden valley where one may hope that a wreath of glory awaits.

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[1] Smith is identified as the author of the treatise by Denyse Rockey (1980, 214-15).

[2] An extravagant puff had appeared in *Blackwood's* the previous January: see 'Notice Respecting Mr Broster.'