Two books look at the poor fit of speaker and voice

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A VOICE AND NOTHING MORE
BY MLADEN DOLAR
CAMBRIDGE, MA: MIT PRESS. 223 PAGES. $20.

STUTTER
BY MARC SHELL

articulate beings share their lives with a surrogate self, a sonorous twin who lives on the tip of the tongue. Singers and others who live off their voices may develop complex relations with this vocal alter ego, seeing it as living a delinquent life of its own and as having to be disciplined, propitiated, and sometimes cunningly beguiled into compliance. It seems all the more odd, then, that the possession and inhabitation of one’s voice should be regarded as synonymous with keeping a grip on oneself. Writers are taught to think that they cannot come into their own until they have forged a distinctive voice, one that is different from their merely native tongue.

Mladen Dolar’s A Voice and Nothing More and Marc Shell’s Stutter consider different aspects of this poor fit between speaker and voice. Dolar’s book develops the hints about the voice found in Jacques Lacan’s writings into a series of searching analyses of the voice’s pangs and paradoxes. Shell’s study mixes descriptions of his own experiences as a lifelong stammerer with a number of teasing, erudite, intriguing meditations on the cultural phenomenology of the stutter, in history, rhetoric, and writing.

For Dolar, the voice is everywhere apparent yet nowhere fully apprehensible as such. Phonology sounds as if it ought to be the science of voices, but in fact the voice is the unanalyzable: it is the voice that is both the language and the language of the body. Dolar’s account of the “natural” human voice conveys a long history of the voice as something that is stigmatized and pathological: the voice is the organ of the body that has to be disciplined and propitiated.

As for Shell, he too argues that stutters and stutterers’ voices are not mere voices but are altogether different things. Stutters are not productions of the voice, they are something like a kind of royal road to the Secret Doctrine of Psychoanalysis. Happily burdened by Icarian obeisance, Dolar travels very lightly in a way that is resonant of the considerable critical literature that has built up in recent years regarding the history and social meanings of the voice, in the work, for example, of Anzieu, Griffiths, Frank, Kahn, Kahane, Muto, Poole, Peters, Rosolato, Ronell, and Schmidt—work he has either forgotten to read or forgotten to tell us he has read.

Dolar is much concerned with the ways in which truth, law, and power are bound up in the exercise of the voice. “It is not congruent for a Philosopher to stutter and bubble,” wrote William Penn. And yet there have been stutterers aplenty among philosophers and scientists, including Boyle, Demosthenes, Nietzsche, Newton, Darwin, and, if rumor is to be believed, Aristotle. It makes sense that so many writers should be stutterers—among them Lewis Carroll, Henry James, W. Somerset Maugham, John Updike, and Margaret Drabble (the only woman in my list, but, as four of five stutterers are men, this is the right proportion). As Shell points out in his fascinating, vagabond reflections on the phenomenon of stuttering, writers have the chance to build for themselves a prosthetic, non-physiological voice. But for that very reason, it is at first surprising that stuttering should be so common among performers who rely on their voices: Lenin, Aneurin Bevan, Winston Churchill, Jimmy Stewart, Marilyn Monroe, James Earl Jones, Mel Tillis, Bruce Willis. Perhaps a clue to this apparent anomaly lies in the fact that nobody stutters when they sing. Shell sounds like a nineteenth-century physiologist when he puts this down to the fact that singing “increases subglottal air pressure.” If orators and actors are doing something more like singing than speaking, this confers the advantage that singing is a much less “natural” activity than speaking is oppressively reputed to be. Those forced to forgo the fantasy of being masters of all they convey are perhaps better equipped to exercise the government of the tongue under artificial circumstances.

Stuttering is often described as a speech disorder, as a breakdown in the normal functioning of the vocal apparatus. But the term “stutter” itself is a highly loaded word, rich in meaning and connotation. It means to stammer, to talk slowly, to ramble, or to trip over words. It can also mean to be stuck, to be stuck in a rut, or to be stuck in a rut. It can mean to be stuck in a rut, to be stuck in a rut, or to be stuck in a rut. It can mean to be stuck in a rut, to be stuck in a rut, or to be stuck in a rut.
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Stuttering is often described as a speech “impediment,” and some of the most interesting pages in *Stutter* are on the relations between stuttering and paralysis. Shell himself suffered from polio as a child and writes evocatively of the fear that the paralysis spawned by the disease would spread across into the voice. He also draws attention to the oddly consistent association between a halting gait and stumbling speech (he might have added squinting to the list of forms of bodily wryness at which history has looked askance). Like deafness, stuttering has sometimes been thought of as a kind of alienation from the human—a condition in which one wrestles with what has become a foreign tongue. Its victims, or exponents, are thought of as babblers or barbarians, suffering the jeering ocholalia with which the Greeks designated those beyond the pale of the Logos. Again like the deaf, stutterers are compared to animals. As Shell astutely observes, when animals were first given human speech in animated film, they often, like Donald Duck and Porky Pig, suffered from speech impediments.

But if stuttering is an impediment, it is also oddly generative. Some of the funniest and most thought-provoking passages in Shell’s book concern the adaptive strategies of the stutterer. Stutterers tend to become skillful synonymizers, unbelievers in the church of the mot juste. For the stutterer, there are always too many words and yet