

# VOX POX

Two books look at the poor fit of speaker and voice

STEVEN CONNOR

## A VOICE AND NOTHING MORE

BY MLADEN DOLAR

CAMBRIDGE, MA: MIT PRESS. 223 PAGES. \$20.

## STUTTER

BY MARC SHELL

CAMBRIDGE, MA: HARVARD UNIVERSITY PRESS. 341 PAGES. \$28.

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 stutterer 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 a kind of royal road to the Secret Doctrine of Psychoanalysis. Happily burdened by Lacanian obeisance, Dolar travels very light indeed with respect to 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 babble," 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 upon 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 subglottalic 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

never quite enough. As a stutterer, Lewis Carroll was well equipped to appreciate the sentiments he articulated during the Mad Hatter's tea party: "'You should say what you mean,' said the March Hare. . . . 'I do,' Alice hastily replied; 'at least . . . I mean what I say—that's the same thing, you know.' 'Not the same thing a bit!' said the Hatter." Late in the book, Shell reveals that his particular stumbling block was the word *stutter* itself, leading to his familiarity and, as a literature professor, professional interest in its ill-assorted kith and kin—*balbutiate, famble, hem, buff, clutter, mammer, tattle, titubate*. Shell maintains that there is a relation between the particular kind of neurophysiological anomaly represented by stuttering and the systematic arts of derangement we know as rhetoric and literature. His book comes to a climax with some impassioned pages that try to show that Shakespeare intended Hamlet to be seen as a "stuttering punster and perseverating stutterer."

Stuttering has become both a predicament and an opportunity in modern writing. Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* has a stutterer at its heart, whose impediment is writ large across the word firmament of the book. Beckett's work consistently evokes the condition of stuttering, broken speech. Shell's book has made me realize that Beckett must have based the episode in *Molloy* that describes a method for sucking stones in strict rotation on the story of Demosthenes, who combated his rhotacism (difficulty with the *r* sound) by cramming his mouth with pebbles and declaiming to the waves. In popular culture, which has inherited this modernist tic, stuttering operates as a



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 stutterer 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 evades even its grasp, taken up as it is only with the patterns of differentiation that can be abstracted from particular voices. The voice "makes the utterance possible, but it disappears in it, it goes up in smoke in the meaning being produced." Devout Derrideans insist that the voice is the source of power and guarantee of metaphysical privilege, but its intoxications and enchantments also make it the vehicle of what Augustine called "sinning by the ear." Other chapters in *A Voice and Nothing More* explore the politics of vocal power, the idea of the voice of conscience in ethics and law, and the strange convolutions of sound and voice in Freud and Kafka. The most telling, even thrilling, passages in this exacting book emphasize the intricate knitting together of body and soul in the voice. "The voice is the flesh of the soul, its ineradicable materiality, by which the soul can never be rid of the body," Dolar memorably writes. And yet the immanence of voice in the living body renders it "a body cloven by the impossible rift between an interior and an exterior."

Though *A Voice and Nothing More* is driven throughout by ardent and formidable intelligence, Dolar is, like George Meredith's a "Later Alexandrian," mad for the kind of "mystic wrynesses" that Lacanian theory so amply allows. Indeed, the last words of his book make it clear that he regards the mysteries of the voice as a



**Three who stuttered. From top: Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, Moscow, 1921. Porky Pig, c. 1950. Bruce Willis in *Die Hard*, 1988.**

sounds like a nineteenth-century physiologist when he puts this down to the fact that singing "increases subglottalic 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 "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 echolalia 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

at its heart, whose impediment is writ large across the word firmament of the book. Beckett's work consistently evokes the condition of stuttering, broken speech. Shell's book has made me realize that Beckett must have based the episode in *Molloy* that describes a method for sucking stones in strict rotation on the story of Demosthenes, who combated his rhotacism (difficulty with the *r* sound) by cramming his mouth with pebbles and declaiming to the waves. In popular culture, which has inherited this modernist tic, stuttering enacts angry or ironic disidentification, from Roger Daltrey's "Why don't you all f-f-fade away" through to the "Stutter Rap (No Sleep 'Til Bedtime)" of Morris Minor and the Majors. Indeed, though stuttering is usually an affliction, it can also be a temptation, a tipsy sin of the tongue to complement Augustine's voluptuousness of the ear. The nineteenth-century physiologist John Good advised that "children . . . ought never to be intrusted in the company of a stutterer, till their speech has become steady and confirmed." An adorable stutterer in my class at school caused an epidemic of libidinous mimicry among her would-be consorts.

For both Dolar and Shell, reasoning in their very different ways, the voice is a kind of umbilical cord that ties together self and social world (the Koran refers to Moses's stutter as a knotting of the tongue). I think that Dolar would readily consent to Shell's conclusion that "stuttering is the mystery where language and culture meet." Marshall McLuhan once remarked that "language is a form of organized stutter." It may be that the phenomenon of voice is best thought of as a kind of stutter in the order of things—an obstacle, a black hole, a convulsive interval—in which the world turns in on itself and starts meaning to speak. □

Steven Connor is the author of *Dumbstruck: A Cultural History of Ventriloquism* (Oxford University Press, 2000).