

The Writer's Speech: Stuttering, Glossolalia and the Body in Sorokin's *A Month in Dachau*

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У Володи есть врожденное, наверное, заикание, и когда с ним общаешься в первый раз, такое ощущение, что он говорит как терминатор. Это интересный факт: не просто заикание, а стремление его скрыть, спрятать. Заикание—это важная литературная фигура, потому что в литературе, начиная с Библии, заикаются те, кто видел Бога. Моисей был заикой.¹

Lev Danilkin

[If] we say that a conceptual persona stammers, it is no longer a type who stammers in a particular language but a thinker who makes the whole of language stammer: the interesting question then is, "What is this thought that can only stammer?"²

Deleuze & Guattari

Oh bless thee continuous stutter
Of the word being made into flesh.

Leonard Cohen, *The Window*, 1979

VIACHESLAV Kuritsyn's 1999 essay "Telo teksta" ("The Body of the Text") advances a hermeneutics of Vladimir Sorokin's early oeuvre that has since become a staple: the "physiological" approach. He writes:

- 1 "Volodya, since birth probably, has had a stutter, and when you meet him for the first time you get the feeling that he talks like the Terminator. It's interesting: not just the stutter, but the urge to cover it up, to hide it. Stuttering is an important literary image, because in literature, starting with the Bible, the ones who stutter are the ones who've seen God. Moses was a stutterer." Lev Danilkin, 2002, "Serdtshe Sorokina," *Afisha.ru*, 29 April, http://www.afisha.ru/article/vladimir_sorokin/, accessed 2 August 2012. The quote comes from Alexander Ivanov, director of *Ad Marginem* press. Except where indicated, translations from the Russian are mine.
- 2 Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari, 1994, *What Is Philosophy?*, transl. H. Tomlinson & G. Burchell, New York, p. 69.

Сорокин обращает наше внимание на то, что у всякого текста, помимо смысла, прежде всего есть тело. Прежде всего текст—ряды букв, столбцы строк. Мясо чтения и письма. Свирепое отношение к Сорокину со стороны очень изрядной части русской литературной общественности связано с тем, что у свирепствующих есть привычка относиться в отношении к литературе как к феномену духовному или интеллектуальному, но нет привычки телесного его переживания. Между тем процесс письма и чтения есть прежде всего процесс физиологический.³

The notion of a “body-text” has proven remarkably productive for Sorokin studies of the last 20 years. Some commentators emphasize the repulsive, liberating aspects of the author’s early conceptualist works, noting, like Dmitrii Levukh, that Sorokin depicts “the most loathsome manifestations of matter.” He adds: “Decomposition, faeces, sperm, urine, menstrual discharge—that’s the factually obligatory attribute of Sorokin’s prose. Moreover, the images build themselves up in such a masterful fashion, that in engaging with this text you experience an almost physiological revulsion.”⁴

Other critics, such as Slobodanka Vladiv-Glover, have accentuated the linguistic side of the body-text equation:

3 “Sorokin reorients our attention to the fact that, in every text, apart from its meaning, there is first and foremost a body. Before anything else the text is rows of letters, columns of lines. The meat of reading and writing. The infuriated reaction to Sorokin in a considerable part of the Russian literary society is owing to the fact that the “infuriates” [*svireptstvuiushchikh*] have the custom of relating to literature as a spiritual or intellectual phenomenon, but no custom of experiencing it as something bodily. But the process of writing and reading is first and foremost physiological.” Viacheslav Kuritsyn, “Telo Teksta,” 1999, *Poetik der Metadikursivität: Zum postmodernen Prosa- Film- und Dramenwerk von Vladimir Sorokin*, ed. D. Burkhart, Munich, pp. 61–64; p. 63.

4 Dmitrii Levukh in I. S. Skoropanova, 1999, *Russkaia postmodernistskaia literatura: uchebnoe posobie dlia studentov filologicheskikh fakul'tetov vuzov*, Moscow, p. 263. Such readings have resonances with feminist treatments of violence, sex and the abject, such as Simone de Beauvoir’s “Faut-il brûler Sade?” (Must We Burn Sade?, 1951–52); Elaine Scarry’s *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (1987); Linda Williams’ concept of body genres in her Foucauldian study of cinematic pornography *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure and the ‘Frenzy of the Visible’* (1989–99); and Susan Sontag’s *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2002).

Sorokin's poetics is a poetics of the body, in which body parts function as corporeal or incorporated representations of signs caught up in the drama of desire and signification (*signifiance*). The body is thus a producer of signs and as such a transgressive 'limit,' offering access to experience and allowing discourse to be lived by both the speaking and reading subject.⁵

Common to such interpretations of Sorokin's texts is, paradoxically, their emphasis on the fundamental incommunicability of bodily experiences which they (seek to) represent, together with the undeniable immanence of the physiological which determines how they (at times literally, viscerally) *move* the reader. At its most extreme, Sorokin's unruly embedded corporeality breaks through Vladiv-Glover's discursive limits, to point apotropically away from the body; as Mark Lipovetsky argues, in such

5 Slobodanka Vladiv-Glover, 1999, "Vladimir Sorokin's Post-Avant-Garde Prose and Kant's Analytic of the Sublime," *Poetik der Metadiskursivität: Zum postmodernen Prosa- Film- und Dramenwerk von Vladimir Sorokin*, ed. D. Burkhart, Munich, pp. 21–35; p. 30, italics in original. Sorokin himself, as is well known, has long advanced such "physiological" readings of his work. Scholars will recognize interview quotes such as this one, part of the author's oft-proclaimed project to re-insert the body into Russian literature: "When I read classical authors the question of the corporeal nature of characters always occurred to me. I felt the movements of the soul, say, of Pierre Bezukhov or Alyosha Karamazov, but I did not feel their bodies. These are clots of psychic energy, which can expand to abysses or shrink to a needle's eye. The Russian literary body, though, absorbs the characters and deprives them of their corporeality. We shall never know how Natasha Rostova's armpits smelled and what pimples Alyosha Karamazov had. [...] I wanted to compensate for the absence of corporeality in Russian Literature." (quoted in Ulrich Schmid, 2000, "Flowers of Evil: The Poetics of Monstrosity in Contemporary Russian Literature (Erofeev, Mamleev, Sokolov, Sorokin)," *Russian Literature* 48 (2), pp. 205–21; p. 219fn). More recently, Sorokin has continued to see his early writings in such "body-text" terms. In 2006, he looked back to his 1970s/80s conceptualist works, saying: Я делал бинарные литературные бомбочки, состоящие из двух несоединимых частей: соцреалистической и части, построенной на реальной физиологии, а в результате происходил взрыв, и он наполнял меня, как литератора, некоей вспышкой свободы. "I made little binary literary bombs consisting of two incompatible parts: a socialist realist part and a part based on actual physiology. As a result there was an explosion, and it filled me, as a writer, with a certain flash of freedom." Vladimir Sorokin in Marina Abasheva, 2012, "Sorokin nulevykh: v prostranstve mifov o natsional'noi identichnosti," *Vestnik Permskogo Universiteta: rossiiskaia i zarubezhnaia filologiya* 1 (17), pp. 202–209; p. 202.

moments Sorokin's mimicry of the (super-)human voice links the *sōma* or base material body with the transcendent.⁶

Indeed, it is precisely then—when the text explicitly “breaks down” into obsessively repeated words, quasi-signifying assemblages of letters, multilingual mutations, phoneme conglomerations and other atomized units—that the reader bears witness to an obscene psycho-linguistic break: author tortures language. To take but one example from the work that is the subject of the present essay, the 1990 *povest'* entitled *Mesiats v Dakhau* (*A Month in Dachau*):

[...] милая каловое валькирии лебервурстокало полеты валькирокаловополето в рота в рота в рота кала ты ты иак иак иак накала теплое Вагнер снятие со креста положение в белое гроба на столовое я голое господа официрохохо и в моегроботело испражгешайсен на меня по десять по десять унд зольдатен и шайсе шайсе шайсе шмект дас бссер унд я заставлялся тянуть из кала руку и нажимало абдрюкен пистолета русская рулетка и нажимало нажимало когда они испражшайсе и к виску седовласой русской матери пять раз нажимало и она жива жива жива я [...]⁷

6 See Mark Lipovetsky's contribution to this volume. In contrast to those who privileged the postmodernist Sorokin's attention to “surfaces,” in the 1990s Vladiv-Glover and others came to champion Sorokin's project as an attempt to reveal an unrepresentable higher reality accessible through Sadean violence against the sacrificial body. Sorokin, she contends, “dismantl[es] the numerous social and cultural discourses that mask or obstruct concrete, bodily experience and the pulsing of desire which seeks its outlet beyond language and discursivity, in the immediacy of the present moment in which it consumes itself without residue, in sacrifice as a gesture of excess.” Vladiv-Glover, 1999, p. 22.

7 “[...] dear fecalo valkyrie leberwurstofaecal flights valkyrofecaloflying in mouthal officio oralo orifecal you you jak jak jakofecal warm wagner removal from the cross placing in a white coffi on a tablo i'm naked gentlemen offizierohaha in mycoffin corps defecascheissen on me ten at a time ten at und soldaten i scheisse scheisse scheisse schmeckt das besser und i forced myself to drag my hand out of the feces and pressed abdrucken pistoletto russian roulette and pressed pressed when they defecascheisse and to the temple of gray-haired russian mother pressed five times and she is alive alive i [...].” Vladimir Sorokin, 1998, “Mesiats v Dakhau,” *Sobranie sochinenii v dvukh tomakh*, vol. 1, Moscow, pp. 799–815; p. 812; Vladimir Sorokin, 1994, “A Month in Dachau,” *Grand Street* 12 (4), transl. J. Gambrell, pp. 233–53; p. 249.

Often interpreted as the author's *zaum'* or trans-sense strategy, itself an important aspect of his avant-garde linguistic and ideological deconstructive project,⁸ these instances of what Mikhail Ryklin calls a "*non-native element of transgression* [...]" subsequently translated into an asignifying scheme,"⁹ constitute a different form of embodiment in Sorokin's texts, which I will argue we can index directly to the writer's own voice and physical body. As Ryklin characterizes such utterances:

Этот заново изобретаемый им язык не только маркирует дистанцию писателя от идеологии, но и способствует ее восприятию как ритмизованного шума, смысл которого вовсе не обязательно понимать, если вы овладели его формой. Талант писателя заключается в создании у читателя впечатления достоверности таких шумовых языков, языков-криков, состоящих из набора фонем [...], языков-плачей [...]¹⁰

From whence do these "scream-languages," "wail-languages" emanate? In what ways can we think of them as "authentic"? And why do repetition, recycling and return ("jak jak jakofaecal," "she is alive alive alive i") comprise such a prominent part of Sorokin's literary strategy in such passages from *A Month in Dachau* in particular? I submit that an understudied aspect of the writer's "physiocultural biography," so to speak, accounts for these qualities, complicating any purely "literary" interpretation of such "psychotic" Sorokinian graphomania.

8 For example, Boris Groys compares the "Martin Alekseevich" chapter of *Norma* (*The Norm*, 1979–83) to a Khlebnikovian "verbal foam on the lips." Boris Groys, 1992, *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond*, Princeton, N.J., p. 104.

9 Mikhail Ryklin, 1998, "Medium i avtor," in Vladimir Sorokin: *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 2, pp. 737–51; p. 745, italics in original: "аллогенный элемент [...]" затем переводимый в асигнификативный план."

10 "[Sorokin's] newly invented language not only marks the writer's detachment from ideology, but also enables its perception as that of a rhythmic noise, whose sense you need not grasp at all, if you've mastered its form. The writer's talent lies in creating an impression of authenticity in the reader, the authenticity of these noise-languages, scream-languages, composed of a set of phonemes [...], wail-languages [...]" Ryklin, 1998, p. 743.

Style and stutter 1

Though a fact only occasionally acknowledged by critics and fans, Vladimir Sorokin is a long-time stutterer.¹¹ Like many people with this disability who did and did not grow up in the Soviet Union, Sorokin attributes his speech impediment to childhood trauma—intriguingly, one linked to sexuality. As he told Sally Laird in 1999:

In my own case, for example, I remember going through various early erotic experiences, having various fantasies while I was still at kindergarten and being unable to sleep there when I was supposed to. And there was a particularly severe nurse there, a sort of old maid type, who caught me playing with myself and threatened to fetch the scissors and cut off my penis. It was after that that I started stammering badly.¹²

Just as this memory recalls psychoanalytic explanations for stuttering as a forceful form of castration anxiety,¹³ so will Sorokin's early strategies to

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- 11 A widely-accepted definition of stuttering calls it “the interruption of the flow of speech by hesitations, prolongation of sounds and blockages sufficient to cause anxiety and impair verbal communication.” Jeffrey K. Johnson, 2008, “The Visualization of the Twisted Tongue: Portrayals of Stuttering in Film, Television, and Comic Books,” *Journal of Popular Culture* 41 (2), pp. 245–61; p. 245. About one percent of the world's population stutters, with at least five percent reporting stuttering behaviour at some point in life, according to Starkweather and Givens-Ackerman, who note: “[Stuttering] can interfere with the process of communication by taking up speech time without contributing information and by calling unwanted attention to the way in which words are spoken, thus distracting the listener from the content. To the extent that these two things occur, stuttering is a *disability*.” C.W. Starkweather & Janet Givens-Ackerman, 1996, *Stuttering*, Austin, p. 9, italics in original. As explored below, such scientific, “medicalized” understandings of stuttering find their counterbalance in Disability Studies discourses which emphasize the productive, multicultural qualities of phenomena linked to physical/cognitive difference.
- 12 Sally Laird, 1999, *Voices of Russian Literature: Interviews with Ten Contemporary Writers*, Oxford, p. 156. Sorokin's “explanation,” among other things, reflects Soviet defectology's emphasis on “syndrome” (as elaborated by the field's founder Lev Vygotskii in the 1920s), whereby “[u]nder the influence of a child's defect, the relationship between the child and the primary caregiver becomes disturbed, and this leads to the secondary defect that influences the whole course of the child's development.” Elena L. Grigorenko, 1998, “Russian ‘Defectology’: Anticipating *Perestroika* in the Field,” *Journal of Learning Disabilities* 31 (2), pp. 193–207; p. 195. Defectology in the USSR emphasized the role of interpersonal relations in disability in ways comparable to the “Social Model” of disability in the West.
- 13 On one psychoanalytic view of stuttering, see Tomas Plänklers, 1999, “Speaking in the

manage his disability—avoiding occasions for public speaking, talking deliberately, substituting words in mid-sentence to maintain flow, lip-smacking—sound familiar to many stutterers, as will his descriptions in various interviews of the social isolation it had brought on by adolescence.¹⁴ As also often occurs, many members of the public do not know how to read these tell-tale signs, as evidenced by a 2008 online response comments thread to an *Ekho Moskvy* interview with the writer:

21 сентября 2008 | 18:15

ТЯЖЕЛО СЛУШАТЬ БЫЛО!

При всем уважении к г-ну Сорокину, было ужасно ТЯЖЕЛО слушать его речь с каким-то постоянным омерзительным старческим причмокиванием, и, еле-еле словно карамельная нуга, голос! Выключил радио, лучше перечитаю в текстовой версии!

25 сентября 2008 | 19:14

Ну вы что!

Это же не от него зависит. Ему просто немного тяжело говорить, т.к он заикается и, чтобы вы не слышали обрывистой речи, он причмокиванием себе помогает. Некоторые, насколько я знаю, движениями пальцев рук себе помогают (здесь много логопедических методик). Кто как приспособился. [...]

Claustrum: the Psychodynamics of Stuttering,” *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 80 (2), pp. 239–56; on the condition as indicative of “weakness,” see Johnson, 2008, pp. 245–46. In a reading which partly informs my own, Ulrich Schmid interprets the Russian writer’s near-castration episode thus: “Sorokin reacts to the fragility of the world and the totalitarian attack on his sexual integrity by partially losing his ability to speak. He mutilates language,— a process which ends eventually in the repetition of a limited set of sentences.” Schmid, 2000, p. 217.

- 14 In 2004 the writer had this exchange with an interviewer:—Когда я был мальчиком, то очень любил изображать соседей, друзей, актеров. Но очень сильно заикался и разговорился только в студенческие годы.—Стеснялись говорить?—Да, был некий барьер. И я не любил выступать публично: возникали проблемы, когда надо было доклад какой-нибудь делать: просто сумасшествие какое-то. “When I was a boy I liked doing impressions of neighbours, friends, actors. But I stuttered a lot, and came out of my shell only later, in my student years.”—“You were afraid to talk?”—“Yes, there was a kind of barrier. And I didn’t like speaking in public; there were problems when I had to do a report of some kind—it was just insane.” Vladimir Sorokin, 2004, “My vse otravleny literaturoi,” *Arba.ru*, <http://www.arba.ru/art/849/7>, accessed 2 August 2012.

Надо терпиме [sic] быть. Это ведь показатель отношения общества к людям с различными ограничениями, к инвалидам.¹⁵

As evident from this exchange, over the years Sorokin's compensatory techniques and self-discipline have made him much more adept and comfortable speaking in public, to the point that even some close acquaintances do not immediately notice his impairment—a not unusual occurrence for many stammerers.¹⁶ But those very techniques, in particular his deliberate style of speech, can lead to misunderstandings and assumptions about his character that recall persistent stereotypes of effete, aloof or timid stutterers.¹⁷ As recently as 2011, a *New York Times* reporter could include this passage in a profile of the writer:

15 Comments to Vladimir Sorokin interview, 2008, *Ekho Moskvy: Dithyramb*, <http://echo.msk.ru/programs/dithyramb/540981-echo/comments.html>, accessed 2 August 2012, ellipses in original: "September 21, 2008/18:15/IT WAS HARD TO LISTEN TO!/All due respect to Mr. Sorokin, but it was terribly HARD to listen to him speaking, with his constant, disgusting old-man lip-smacking and his voice just barely moving along like caramel nougat. I turned off the radio, better to read over the text version.// September 25, 2008/19:14/How dare you!/It isn't his fault. He just has some trouble speaking because he stutters and lip-smacking helps him to avoid big gaps in his speech. Some people, as far as I know, move their fingers to help them get through it (there are a lot of speech therapy techniques here). Everyone adjusts as needed. [...] We have to be more tolerant. After all, this is a sign of how society relates to people with different limitations, to the disabled."

16 His English translator, the American Jamey Gambrell, related to me just such an experience when she first met Sorokin in the 1980s. Natascha Drubek-Meyer's article, devoted to Sorokin's strategies of reading in his public performances, only touches on his stutter. Natascha Drubek-Meyer, 1999, "Sorokins Bauch-Reden als *Negativ-performance*. Beitrag zur Konferenz 'Das postmoderne Prosa-, Film- und Dramenwerk von Vladimir Sorokin,'" *Poetik der Metadiskursivität: Zum postmodernen Prosa-, Film- und Dramenwerk von Vladimir Sorokin*, ed. D. Burkhart, Munich, pp. 197–212. On disability and passing, what Tanya Titchkovsky calls the "charting of a deviant individual's techniques which he or she employs in order to negotiate a stance in the land of normalcy," see Tanya Titchkovsky, 2003, *Disability, Self, and Society*, Toronto, p. 70; and Tobin Siebers, 2008, *Disability Theory*, Ann Arbor, Mich., chapter 5. It goes without saying that stutterers are cognitively normal human beings: "[S]tuttering is not a disorder of language. Although there is a relationship between stuttering and language [...] stuttering is not a primary disorder of any linguistic process. Language use may be influenced by stuttering, and linguistic knowledge may influence the development of stuttering [...] but the person who stutters seems to be as adept linguistically as the person who does not stutter." Starkweather & Givens-Ackerman, 1996, p. 20.

17 In his discussion of fictional portrayals of stutterers, Johnson calls this impediment a "shorthand" for signifying nervousness or weakness, noting, "[b]ecause many in

In person, Mr Sorokin is diffident and thoughtful; a former stutterer, he releases words into the air around him as carefully as a cashier counting out change. In the 1980s, when his writing began circulating as samizdat in Moscow's avant-garde circles, the central mystery was how such violent material could originate in such a polite young man.¹⁸

Whatever the mysteries of the "polite young man's" inner life, his speech difference, I suggest, forms the key to grasping an important aspect of Sorokin's poetics in the late Soviet era: the writer's endless "peristaltic" problematization of language; his causing it to "tremble from head to toe," in Gilles Deleuze's phrase (in his essay "Bégaya-t-il")¹⁹—dethrones it as a tool of fluid communication. In so doing, it reveals language's direct (if murky) access to an inscrutable (if forceful) subjectivity, evoking a transcendent bio-ahistoricism. In the Sorokinian body-text, nowhere more so than in *A Month in Dachau*, language strikingly, insistently, stammers.²⁰

A Month in Dachau

Sorokin's 1990 novella taps multilinguistic quasi-illegibility to stage a scene of extreme bodily violence, Elaine Scarry's "unmaking of the world." This Sadean text of an alternate reality where Hitler and Stalin have divided up the world presents the first-person narrator-*intelligent's* "vacation" in a Dachau concentration camp. The body is literally "embedded" into the text, in the sense that the very landscape has been re-

the general public already believe stutterers to be anxious, unconfident, and timid, then writers need not spend precious time explaining that a character possesses these traits, they instead assume the audience will make the mental leap from the speech impediment to the weak behaviours in which [sic] it is associated." Johnson, 2008, pp. 246–48.

18 Ellen Barry, 2011, "From a Novelist, Shock Treatment for Mother Russia," *The New York Times*, 30 April, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/30/books/the-russian-novelist-vladimir-sorokin.html?pagewanted=all>, accessed 2 August 2012.

19 "He Stuttered." Gilles Deleuze, 1997, *Essays Critical and Clinical*, transl. D.W. Smith & M.A. Greco, Minneapolis, Minn., p. 109.

20 In addition to discussing it in interviews, Sorokin has addressed his own condition in fictional works more explicitly, through stuttering characters: for example in his first published novel *Ochered'* (*The Queue*, 1983) and the play *Hochzeitsreise* (1994–95). These Russian fictional figures who stutter join a list that includes Gogol's Akakii Akakievich, Akunin's Erast Fandorin and a number of characters in the filmmaker Andrei Tarkovskii's oeuvre.

fashioned into a gigantic portrait of the Führer—the town of Braunau has been reshaped so as to represent his moustache. In this setting, the hero (identified, significantly, as “Vladimir Georgievich Sorokin,” born in 1955)²¹ is subjected, in chamber after numbered chamber, to countless atrocities, including torture, rape, coprophagy, forced cannibalism and other horrors extreme even by this writer’s standards; Vitaly Chernetsky opined that in this story Sorokin goes further than in his previous work in “disturbing the ‘sacred cows’ of Russian cultural iconography.”²²

In his nightmare vision blending Stalinism and Nazism, the author parodically tackles the entire legacy of twentieth century terror through the medium of his “own” tormented flesh, harried remorselessly in language that collapses into a trans-sense-like register (the text grows more and more obtuse, mixing German with nonsense verse, while a wedge-shaped paragraph “punctures” its neighbour).²³ Ritualistic torture and sadomasochistic acts are graphically described and/or suggested through Russo-German word roots, hellish flashes of imagery and a stream of consciousness that swerves wildly from Woolfian to Kharmesque to Kabbalistic for a vicious satire on both Russian Orthodox martyrdom and intelligentsia sanctimony:

КАМЕРА 12: все подпишу не надо все подпишу не надо туда простите подпишу подпишу не надо я не буду подпишу не только там не надо подпишу все подпишу все подпишу я все подпишу не надо я все подпишу не надо все подпишу не надо я подпишу хорошие не надо я подпишу хорошие не надо я подпишу еще не

21 Hélène Mélat notes of Sorokin’s decision to give the first-person narrator his own name: Это конечно мистификация, но здесь уже проступает фигура настоящего автора. Автор как бы сопоставляет себя с решающими и страшными событиями века, ставит себя на их уровень. “This is of course a mystification, but here we see the figure of the real author showing through. It is as if the author juxtaposes himself with the decisive and horrific events of the century, putting himself on their level.” Hélène Mélat, 1999, “Kastrirovannye babochki Vladimira Sorokina,” *Poetik der Metadiskursivität: Zum postmodernen Prosa-, Film- und Dramenwerk von Vladimir Sorokin*, ed. D. Burkhart, Munich, pp. 53–59; p. 58.

22 Vitaly Chernetsky, 2007, *Mapping Postcommunist Cultures: Russia and Ukraine in the Context of Globalization*, Montreal, p. 79.

23 The text prominently displays Sorokin’s castration, impotence and gender neutralization motifs, even on a “grammatical level,” according to Mélat, 1999, p. 56.

How to read *A Month in Dachau*—and indeed much else in Sorokin’s early output—as a “stuttering” text, i.e., as one constructed through a poetics of the stutter?

Style and stutter 11

Firstly and most familiarly, we may read it through a philosophical, deconstructive mode; the Deleuzian concepts of “style” and “stutter” apply particularly well to Sorokin.

For Gilles Deleuze, philosophy is “that which stutters”: “When a language is strained in this way, language in its entirety is submitted to a pressure that makes it fall silent.”²⁶ Writers practicing a form of “minor literature” expose the gaps and fissures in language so that, as Christa Albrecht-Crane notes, “[l]anguage is made to ‘stutter’ when its molar function of representing order takes on a halting, stuttering characteristic, thereby opening up on to a realm that has remained unbound by societal structuring [...]”²⁷ Such a strategy of writing “attend[s] to normative systems of linguistic conventions and articulate[s] ways of resisting such systems by creating lines of (linguistic, cultural-political) rupture and escape.”²⁸ In other words, as Ronald Bogue elucidates, “[l]inguistic stuttering induces a becoming-other of language, but [...] this is only one of a series of becomings that are central to the function of literature—be-

main thing is not to be tethered to egoschmerz schmerz that we can’t get along without each schmerz schmerz our love is written in the heaveschmerz schmerz schmerz i’m prepared to prove immediaschmerz schmerz schmerz. [...] /CELL 24: crucified crucified like peter upside down light of jupiter saturn ball masked ball strauss champagne laughter laughed laughing gentlemen offizieren und soldaten und gretchenmargarethe a waltz with all with all gentlemen division offizieren with ritualico bootlicking i do them laughed undressed gretchenmargarethe and for me bootlicking and her undressing and all hundred and twelve ss division offizieren masturbieren and spermspilling on gretchenmargarethe and handed out vibrators and one hundred and twelve vibrobodding on spermdrenched gretchenmargo intensifying voices vibratonily voluptulustly and lowering of the cross and mine my oral under her anal and vibrators and two lines of fifty-six offizieren each to the oralo of gretchen the official of margarethe sucking sucking sucking memberoffizierisch and wagner wagner in my mouth yours [...]” Sorokin, 1999, p. 812.; Eng. Sorokin, 1994, p. 249.

26 Deleuze, 1997, p. 113.

27 Christa Albrecht-Crane, 2005, “Style, Stutter,” *Gilles Deleuze: Key Concepts*, ed. C.J. Stivale, Montreal, pp. 121–30; p. 125.

28 Albrecht-Crane, 2005, p. 121.

coming-woman, becoming- child, becoming-black, becoming-animal, becoming-molecular, becoming-imperceptible [...]”²⁹

This is what Deleuze means when he says that great literature is written in a kind of foreign language within one’s own language; the “becoming-other” of language attains a “delirium that carries it off, a witch’s line that escapes the dominant system.”³⁰ Deleuze characterizes such acts of resistance as making “one’s language stutter, face to face, or face to back, and at the same time to push language as a whole to its limit, to its outside, to its silence—this would be like the boom and the crash.”³¹ For Deleuze, style in literature is the “deforming” result of stutter: “the foreign language within language.”³²

Such a line of analysis, which analogizes the stutter to an emancipatory estrangement, to some extent coincides with previous critical modes directed at Sorokin by Ryklin, Lipovetsky, Dmitrii Prigov and Kuritsyn, among others. Furthermore, the Artaudian “tormented” discourse of *A Month in Dachau* certainly transgresses Deleuze’s linguistic limits, breaking through to the “becoming-other” of language induced by stutter (“don’t i’ll sign be nice don’t i’ll sign nice don’t i’ll sign again no deeper don’t i’ll sign”; “gretchen paleschmerz schmerz schmerz atient and hide our feelschmerz schmerz we”). On the other hand, from a Disability Studies perspective the Deleuzan concept of stutter provokes a major objection: it needlessly metaphorizes disability (romanticizing the stutter, so to speak), a rhetorical move warned against by, among others, Susan Sontag in *Illness as Metaphor*.³³ Simply put, in the case of a writer

29 Ronald Bogue, 2004, “Minor Writing and Minor Literature,” *Symploke* 5 (1), pp. 99–118; p. 108.

30 Deleuze, 1997, p. 5.

31 Deleuze, 1997, p. 113.

32 Deleuze, 1997, p. 113.

33 Sontag writes: “As cancer is now imagined to be the wages of repression, so [tuberculosis] was once explained as the ravages of frustration.” Susan Sontag, 1990, *Illness as Metaphor and Aids and Its Metaphors*, New York, p. 21. Brenda Brueggemann et al. argue that language “is laden with metaphors of ability.” Brenda J. Brueggemann, Linda F. White, Patricia A. Dunn, Barbara A. Heifferon & Johnson Cheu, 2001, “Becoming Visible: Lessons in Disability,” *College Composition and Communication* 52 (3), pp. 368–98; p. 369. (She offers such examples as “sight equalling insight”; “turning deaf ears” and “coming up with ‘lame ideas.’”) They go on: “[D]isability studies does invite us all to at least consider the able-bodied agenda lurking in the way we make meaning through so many crippling metaphors, in the way we compose and communicate that disables even as it might be attempting to ‘enable.’” Brueggemann et al., 2001, p. 369.

such as Sorokin, who actually stammers, a reading that reinforces ablist presumptions in language and abstracts the body out of the text seems woefully lacking.

Style and stutter III

I therefore offer a second, complementary analytical mode for a reading of *A Month in Dachau*, derived from the Disability Studies approach of Marc Shell, a literature scholar who also happens to stutter. I particularly want to emphasize the tactical moves used by stammerers to negotiate the recalcitrant tongue, which resists some consonants and phoneme combinations and not others. As Shell describes this process in *Stutter* (2005), such compensation and substitution involve considerable creativity, multi-linguistic synonymy and an openness to giving up control of one's own speech; in other words, one's very language and conceptual frame are shaped not by what one means but by what one can and cannot say:

Consequential and unpredictable changes of meanings in my own speaking—and, I daresay, also in my style of writing—often end with ‘muddled syntax’ and never-ending, uncontrolled meaning. Oftentimes, by the time *I* am done speaking, the *speaking* has done me in.³⁴

Writing, in Shell's description, becomes a kind of prosthetic means of communication that bypasses speaking³⁵—but one which is also affected, enhanced and enriched by the constant need to improvise in speech. A good example: the stutterer Winston Churchill's World War II rallying

34 Marc Shell, 2005, *Stutter*, Cambridge, Mass., p. 26, emphasis in original. Starkweather and Givens-Ackerman, from a perspective owing more to the “medical model” of disability, offer a rather maudlin description of the same process: “[Stammerers] order food they do not want in a restaurant because they know they will stutter on certain sounds. These are people who will exchange the word they want to say for another, easier word. They say ‘Yes?’ when answering the telephone instead of ‘Hello’. Many have adopted nicknames designed to avoid a dreaded sound in their actual name. They pay a high price for not letting their stuttering show. Those who change words can become so involved in the process of finding the easier word to say that their language becomes vague and convoluted. They sacrifice clarity of expression or their preferred food, and with it some self-esteem, to avoid exposing the stutter.” Starkweather & Givens-Ackerman, 1996, p. 33.

35 Starkweather & Givens-Ackerman, 1996, p. 40.

cry to the British people, in which his degree of comfort with speaking a certain phrase at the start of a sentence leads to a famous instance of anaphora in his speech-writing:

We shall not flag nor fail. We shall go on to the end. We shall fight in France and on the seas and oceans; we shall fight with growing confidence and growing strength in the air. We shall defend our island whatever the cost may be; we shall fight on beaches, landing grounds, in fields, in streets and on the hills. We shall never surrender [...]³⁶

The subject of stuttering authors' vexed but fruitful relationship to their own language has fascinated, among others, Margaret Drabble, herself a stuttering author. As she noted in a 2001 speech to the British Stammering Association:

Did any of these take to text because of their difficulties with parole? Was their literary style affected by the nature of their impediment? Why did or do some of them avoid public situations, while others seek them? Do writers stammer more when they speak in bad faith, or when they speak with sincerity, and does the self-knowledge imparted by these warning signals affect what they write and how they write it? Or what they think, and how they think it? Are you more or less likely to think in the words you cannot speak? [...] Henry James was a master of circumlocution and elaboration and paraphrase. Did his baroque speech infect his prose, or was it the other way round? I don't know the answer to that.³⁷

What we can surmise, however, is that disability (along with other modern categories for human beings, such as race, gender and class) plays a role in artists' creative output that is anything but trivial; a stuttering author's negotiation of language cannot be neutral, transparent or cavalier. Recalling Kuritsyn's description of Sorokin's body-text, the Dis-

36 Winston Churchill, 1940, "Dunkirk" (Speech to the House of Commons, June 4, 1940), *The World's Great Speeches*, 4th Enlarged Edition, eds. L. Copeland, L.W. Lamm & S.J. McKenna, London, 1999, pp. 433–39; p. 439.

37 Margaret Drabble, 2001, "Public Speech and Public Silence" (Lecture, October 18, 2001, in the Gulbenkian Lecture Hall in Oxford, at the invitation of the Oxford English Faculty), <http://www.stammering.org/publicspeech.html>, accessed 2 August 2012.

ability Studies scholar Tobin Siebers calls the body “a biological agent teeming with vital and often unruly forces [...] as capable of influencing and transforming social languages as they are capable of influencing and transforming it.”³⁸ The primacy of the body as something other than the mere product of discourse forms an important pillar in Disability theory; the recognition of physical difference (not unlike that of ethnic and gender diversity along a spectrum) likewise contributes, as Rosemarie Garland-Thomson writes, to the task of “shift[ing] our conception of disability from pathology to identity.”³⁹

Thus, by making language “difficult”—even opaque—Sorokin’s *A Month in Dachau* engages in no mere exercise of linguistic estrangement. It analogically returns the body—*his* body, with its uncanniness, unruliness and peristaltic convulsion—to the text. The text, like a lie detector’s hyper-sensitive needle, skirts and squiggles with the author/hero’s travails, tracing his torment/ecstasy across the page. (Or, a more organic figure: like a leviathan unseen beneath the waves, it churns great swells and ripples across the disturbed surface.)⁴⁰

Furthermore, Sorokin’s (stuttering) body-text quivers with the strenuous, recursive nature of the stutter, of language perpetually thinking itself through crisis (figured here as painful pricks, pangs and paroxysms). Speech pathologists, not accidentally, employ the metaphor of the *matreshka* (Russian nesting doll) to describe the supernally, excruciatingly self-aware quality of stuttering speech. As Starkweather and Givens-Ackerman note, it “operat[es] on itself and modif[ies] itself; as a result, it can often create a stack of behaviours, thoughts, and feelings inside other behaviours, thoughts, and feelings.” They conclude:

Whether it is approach-avoidance or the paradox that results from trying to talk recursively, it is no wonder that the person finds him- or herself entangled in an underbrush of words, behaviours, thoughts, and feelings, unable to see a pathway out into a clear meadow of easy talking.⁴¹

38 Siebers, 2008, p. 68.

39 Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, 1997, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature*, New York, p. 137.

40 Vladiv-Glover argues: “The *real*, which is beyond metaphor, is at the core of Sorokin’s poetics and textual practices. Although unrepresentable in language, it is mediated by the body and has effects which are articulated through sensibility.” Vladiv-Glover, 1999, p. 30, emphasis in original.

41 Starkweather & Givens-Ackerman, 1996, pp. 38–40.

Conclusion: glossolalia, witness and unfreedom

Полная сорокинская триада—речь/действие, никак не подготовленное речью/асигнификативная речь—предполагает синтез, который лишь на первый взгляд кажется глоссолалией,—на самом деле это, скорее, ступор.⁴⁴

Not unlike his compatriot Aleksander Sokurov, who “tortures” the medium of cinema to yield up its “truths,” Sorokin in his late-Soviet works pushes language (no longer just Soviet-era discourse, but the system of signification itself) to greater and greater extremes, to depict experiences increasingly resistant to representation: ultra-violence, death, Sadean euphoria, ultimately to “wail languages” as markers of trauma and atrocity—a process some have argued serves a culturally therapeutic function.⁴⁵ In what remains of this essay I want to explore how Sorokin’s stutter (his physiological presence in his texts) resonates with the sublimely horrific stutter of history.

In his memoir *La Tregua* (*The Reawakening*, 1963), Primo Levi tells the sad tale of Hurbinek, a maimed boy of three who dies in 1945, after his Nazi concentration camp is liberated. Hurbinek, the “perfect witness” of Auschwitz, repeats an unknown, unknowable word, *mass-klo* or *mat-isklo*. Like the dying old man in Iurii Olesha’s 1927 short story “Liompa,” who utters the nonsense word of the title just as he passes on to the next world, Hurbinek can only mouth dangling signifiers into the void. As Giorgio Agamben notes in his discussion of Hurbinek:

This means that testimony is the disjunction between two impossibilities of bearing witness; it means that language, in order to bear witness, must give way to a non-language in order to show the impossibility of bearing witness. The language of testimony is a language that no longer signifies and that, in not signifying, advances into what is without language, to the point of taking on a different insignificance—that of the complete witness, that of he who by definition cannot bear witness. To

44 Ryklin, 1998, p. 745. The full Sorokinian triad (speech/act completely unanticipated by speech/asignifying speech) presupposes a synthesis, which only at first glance seems like glossolalia—but is, in fact, stupor.

45 Ellen Rutten, 2009, “Art as Therapy. Sorokin’s Strife with the Soviet Trauma Across Media,” *Russian Literature* 65 (4). pp. 539–59; Lisa R. Wakamiya, 2011, “Post-soviet Contexts and Trauma Studies,” *Slavonica* 17 (2), pp. 134–44.

bear witness, it is therefore not enough to bring language to its own nonsense, to the pure undecidability of letters (m-a-s-s-k-l-o, m-a-t-i-s-k-l-o). It is necessary that this senseless sound be, in turn, the voice of something or someone that, for entirely other reasons, cannot bear witness. It is thus necessary that the impossibility of bearing witness, the “lacuna” that constitutes human language, collapses, giving way to a different impossibility of bearing witness—that which does not have language.⁴⁶

In its purest, ultimately “transcendent” form, Sorokin’s corporeal anti-language similarly erupts into mere phonemes, proto-discourse, opaque walls of senseless or near-senseless orthography: Agamben’s “impossibility of bearing witness” to historical trauma given a grotesque quasi-linguistic shape. In *A Month in Dachau* especially, such an undertaking hinges on the stutter, on language rooted in the indescribable experience of inhabiting the author’s material, mortal body, on discourse riddled with his performative carnal traces.

In his foregrounding of language’s materiality, its “physiology” made eerily visible on the page by the writer’s insistent link of tongue, pen and speech—a link brought about and cemented by his stutter—Sorokin indeed achieves an odd linkage of body and spirit; he attains a species of glossolalia. His speaking in tongues (Ryklin’s “noise-languages,” “scream-languages” and “wail-languages”) serves not only to underscore the limits of language itself, to coax it into revealing intimations of a metaphysical sublime beyond discourse⁴⁷—it also betrays the futility (indeed, impossibility in Agamben’s terms) of bearing witness to the twentieth century’s horrors and living to “tell the tale” in any human language.

In this regard, Sorokin “looks ever more like a writer in the great Russian tradition, conversing with God (or God’s absence), through storytelling, about the mysteries of language, history and the human body.”⁴⁸ More than this: as expressed by Alexander Ivanov in the first epigraph to this essay, there exists in Russian culture an association between disability and the divine, embodied by figures such as the “holy

46 Giorgio Agamben, 2000, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, transl. D. Heller-Roazen, New York, p. 39.

47 Vladiv-Glover 1999 relates such a stance to George Bataille’s “excremental poetics,” while Schmid 2000 compares Sorokin’s evocations of the sacred to the work of Iurii Mamleev.

48 Rachel Polonsky, 2012, “Violent, Ecstatic Russians,” *The New York Review of Books*, 22 March, pp. 28–30; p. 30.

fool” (*blazhennyi* or *iurodivyi*).⁴⁹ Sorokin confirmed to me his own long-standing awareness of this link: “In Russia, people like me [i.e., stutterers] have been thought of as ‘touched by God’. It’s a special role, like that of the holy fool [*blazhennyi*].”⁵⁰

All the same, Sorokin’s is a parodic glossolalia, ultimately foreclosing the possibility of escape to a “better world.” The “freedom” proclaimed by Deleuze’s “language made to stutter” must here contend with Sorokin’s conceptualist aims. As Lipovetsky argues:

This kind of order, born out of chaos and existing with it, could be freedom—the freedom at which the cruelty of the Gnostic search, breaking all possible laws [including linguistic] is aimed. [...] But the problem is that the freedom toward which sots-art strives, remythologizing and deconstructing the power of discourse(s), like Gnostic freedom, has nothing in common with humanism. [...] In Sorokin’s case the dehumanization of freedom is connected above all with the fact that there is no one who can make use of it. Unlike the existentialists, who place the individual person in the centre of the “myth of the absurd,” Sorokin transforms the person into a simulacrum, into a pure function of discourse, a form of realization of discursive power and nothing more.⁵¹

One might quibble with the “nothing more”—as mentioned, Disability theory resists the notion that the body is solely the effect of discourse;⁵²

49 See Sarah D. Phillips, 2009, “‘There Are No Invalids in the USSR!’: A Missing Soviet Chapter in the New Disability History,” *Disability Studies Quarterly* 29 (3), <http://dsq-sds.org/article/view/936/1111>, accessed 2 August 2012; and José Alaniz, 2007, “Cinema Without Barriers,” *Kinokultura* 16, <http://www.kinokultura.com/2007/16-alaniz.shtml>, accessed 2 August 2012.

50 Personal interview with the author 2005.

51 Mark Lipovetsky, 2000, “Vladimir Sorokin’s ‘Theater of Cruelty,’” *Endquote: Sots-art Literature and Soviet Grand Style*, eds. M. Balina, N. Condee, & E.A. Dobrenko. Evanston, Ill., pp. 167–92; pp. 188–89.

52 The critique of modern “body theory,” with its constructionisms, ablist presumptions and problematic abjections, forms a pillar of Disability Studies. As Lennard Davis argued in 1995: “The nightmare of [the idealized body] is the one that is deformed, maimed, mutilated, broken, diseased [...] Rather than face this ragged image, the critic turns to the fluids of sexuality, the gloss of lubrication, the glossary of the body as text, the heteroglossia of the intertext, the glossolalia of the schizophrenic. But almost never the body of the differently abled.” Quoted in Siebers, 2008, p 59.

there is still the “body in the text.” But even some appeal to a Bakhtinian quasi-freedom of the material body must acknowledge a fundamental illegibility akin to the one to which Lipovetsky alludes. The stutter frees us from the “order” of language, only to plunge it into chaos, a freedom only of indecipherability and inaccessibility that itself echoes the wail of “unspeakable” twentieth century totalitarian horror. More than a glos-alalian impulse, Sorokin’s asignifying “trans-sense” trope in *A Month in Dachau* finds its correlate in historical atrocities such as the Holocaust and Stalinism. Though it is observed more fleetingly in post-2000 works such as *Trilogiia* (*Ice Trilogy*, 2002–2005) and *Den’ oprichnika* (*Day of the Oprichnik*, 2006), Sorokin invokes the stutter to confront Putinism as well. The author applies Deleuze’s “creative stuttering,” which “puts language in perpetual disequilibrium,”⁵³ to conjure the moral disequilibrium of late-Soviet Russia and beyond. “[U]ncover[ing] the material core of signifying processes,”⁵⁴ Sorokin speaks the deviant, carnal language of the stutter—the “dark mirror of communication”⁵⁵—making language itself stammer on a journey through the meat-grinder of the twentieth century.

This explains why *A Month in Dachau* perversely evokes Sorokin’s favourite corporeal function, peristalsis: with the narrator’s entry into the concentration camp, “processing” from chamber to chamber, culminating (as far as we can tell) with his being shot into the German sky by cannon. Similarly, peristalsis, a stop-and-start process, involves both eating and shitting (mouth and rectum being directly connected), turning food into faeces by pushing it convulsively along from organ to organ until ejection. It is a natural stammer of the body that collapses the distinction between healthy and unhealthy, order and chaos, able and disabled—just as Sorokin naturalizes twentieth-century historical trauma into a sort of epic digestion:⁵⁶ a peristaltic poetics of unfreedom, with the stutter at its core.⁵⁷

53 Deleuze, 1997, p. 111.

54 Schmid, 2000, p. 218.

55 The phrase was coined by Charles van Riper, a severe stutterer and pioneer in stuttering research (Starkweather & Givens-Ackerman, 1996, p. 32).

56 “The sense of his literary non-sense lies precisely in the digestive reduction of both world and language to primordial units.” Schmid, 2000, p. 217.

57 The author gratefully acknowledges the support of the Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC, in completing a draft of this essay in Summer 2012.