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Stutter

Esther Peeren

In everyday life, stuttering – clinically defined as “a speech disorder that involves frequent and significant problems with the normal fluency and flow of speech”¹ – garners sympathy but is also seen as something aberrant that ought to be overcome for everyone’s benefit. Keeping stutterers from communicating clearly and efficiently, their halting speech is considered a burden on their interlocutors, who may “respond with embarrassment” or even “experience a kind of pain” (Gunn and Rice 2009, 217). At the same time, stuttering interferes with views of the subject as autonomous and fully in control of itself by at once impairing voluntary action (what it intends to say is not what is uttered) and constituting involuntary action (words or parts of words come out altered or repeatedly).

The connection between stuttering and a lack of sovereignty is literalized in the 2010 Oscar-winning film *The King’s Speech* (directed by Tom Hooper), which follows the struggle of King George VI (1895–1952) to overcome his speech impediment in order to give a radio address worthy of a king after – it is suggested – having embarrassed himself and the monarchy at an earlier public speaking engagement. Helped by Lionel Logue, a speech

1 <http://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/stuttering/basics/definition/con-20032854>.

180 therapist who uses a combination of physical exercises and psychoanalysis, the king ends up conquering his stutter to deliver a rousing radio address on the occasion of the British declaration of war on Germany. The implication is that his position as ruler of the British Empire is cemented not so much by what he says, but by the fact that he is able to say it fluently. In 2013, an episode of *Educating Yorkshire*, a Channel 4 reality television show set in a secondary school, went viral after featuring a pupil, Musharaf, who was helped to overcome his severe stutter for his oral exam by his English teacher; the latter used the same method employed by Logue of having the stutterer listen to music while reciting a poem. Here, too, overcoming a stutter is framed as gaining control of oneself and as facilitating unconstrained, effective communication, even when, as in *The King's Speech*, what is achieved is not a speaking *with* but a speaking *to* (an address rather than a dialogue) that is also a speaking to a script (and thus not autonomous). In both cases, moreover, the disappearance of the stutter indicates a return to and affirmation of the norms regarding what constitutes "normal" speech and proper social and political organization: Musharaf can participate in the oral exam without questions having to be raised about its exclusion of those with speech impediments and George VI shores up the British monarchy after it had been brought into crisis by the abdication of Edward VIII.

With stuttering, as a speech disorder, marking non-normative communication and, etymologically, indicating that which forcefully comes up against something else – "stutter" has the same Old High German root (*stôzzen*) as the modern German *stossen*, meaning "to knock, strike against, collide" (see *Oxford English Dictionary*, *stutter*, v. and *stut*, v.) – it is not surprising that it has been taken up **metaphorically** to configure a more general disruptive and potentially critical force. Most notably, Deleuze, in "He Stuttered," extends the stutter beyond speech by arguing that, by stuttering in language, authors like Herman Melville, Franz Kafka, Samuel Beckett, Gherasim Luca, and Charles Péguy

make language itself stutter. Through various techniques – the use of inclusive disjunctions, asignifying particles or repeated substantives – the language system is made to strike against or collide with itself, rendering it “**affective** and intensive,” and putting it “in perpetual disequilibrium or bifurcation” (Deleuze 1997, 107, 108; bold added). For Deleuze, the **creative** stutter is a figure of **immanence**; it is not a vacillation between or mix of different languages but operates within a singular language to modulate or “*minorize*” it (109). Rather than adding something external, it expands, rhizomatically, from within: “Every word is divided, but into itself (*pas-rats, passions-rations*); and every word is combined, but with itself (*pas-passe-passion*)” (110). The critical potential of this immanence is signaled by the parallel Deleuze draws between the way stuttering takes language to its limit, putting it in touch with its outside and with silence, and the “state of *boom*, close to a *crash*” that creates space for radical new insight in “pure science” (109).

This line of thinking has been taken up by Isabel Stengers, who invokes the stutter as that which, in science, can disrupt and destabilize “matters of fact” and “consensus” (Stengers 2005, 154, 158). Her reading of Deleuze and Guattari’s *What Is Philosophy?* (1994) conjures an image of stuttering minorities. Their stutters, if not dismissed or taken as an affliction to be cured, but considered as **symptoms** of systemic problems, may go from being interruptions to staging interventions. The stutter then becomes a “counter-effectuation” that produces “active divergence” (Stengers 2005, 163) and thus a mode of critique. From a similar Deleuzian perspective, Simon O’Sullivan conceives of the stutter, which he equates to the glitch, as both breaking a **world** and making a world, as simultaneous negation and **affirmation**: “The glitch is then a moment of critique, a moment of negation – but

182 also a moment of creation and of affirmation" (O'Sullivan 2009, 251).²

Returning to stuttering as a speech disorder, it may be seen as inducing slowness and retardation through excess, expanding in time through a form of repetition that, instead of reconfirming meaning, moves beyond making immediate sense into ostensible redundancy. In the face of this, "the listener – or spectator – must respond to the glitch, the affective-event, *as* an event, as the bearer of the potentiality of something else" (249). Such a response can only reproduce the hesitation of what it responds to and, hence, should proceed slowly, thoughtfully, patiently. In a similar vein to the arrest of stupidity that Giorgio Agamben argues is the scholar's permanent condition (Pollard 2012, 125), stuttering may well be what the scholar in our age of advanced globalization – marked by relentless acceleration and neoliberal capitalism's cult of 24/7 (Crary 2014) – should respond to, as well as the form this response should take and the effect it should have.

Conceiving of stuttering as at once the object, form, and effect of critique radicalizes Geoffrey Hartman's notion of literary criticism as inducing a stutter in the text:

Criticism as a kind of hermeneutics is disconcerting; like logic but without the latter's motive of absolute internal consistency, it reveals contradictions and equivocations, and so makes fiction interpretable by making it less readable. The fluency of the reader is affected by a kind of stutter: the critic's response becomes deliberately hesitant. (quoted in Sprinker 1980, 221)

2 The stutter's and the glitch's modes of disruption can be differentiated. As a "surge of current or a spurious electrical signal ... ; also, in extended use, a sudden short-lived irregularity in behaviour," a glitch is a less sustained, singular event lacking the stutter's association with repetition, fragmentation, and excess (see *Oxford English Dictionary*, glitch, n.).

Here, rather than inhabiting language, making it “trembl[e] from head to toe” (Deleuze 1997, 109), the stutter is primarily an effect of criticism, produced through it and imposed on the text. It may reveal contradictions and equivocations in the text, but only in the service of interpretation; there is no pushing of “language as a whole to its limit, to its outside, to its silence” (113). As a form of critique, the stutter is seemingly reduced to the delayed but systematic interpretation of hermeneutics that is never outside the critic’s control – its hesitancy is deliberate, a sign of eloquence rather than of inarticulacy or uncertainty. It is the smoothness and comfort of the reader’s experience that is interrupted by this display of expertise.

Hartman’s stutter appears sterile. It leaves aside the stutter’s exposure of the difficulties of enunciation and address, and locates the discomfort and frustration experienced by stutterers like George VI and Musharaf exclusively in the reader. In contrast, conceiving of stuttering as object, form, and effect of critique in the current planetary condition would emphasize and distribute these aspects. In addition, it would stress the “**entanglement** between body and language” (Gunn and Rice 2009, 218; bold added) that renders stuttering a material, embodied experience of ineffectiveness, indeterminacy, uncertainty, and **risk**. Scholarly stuttering should not be an affectation or something we seek to grow out of, but an unavoidable part of our critical practices. Recognizing this is particularly important at a time when the neoliberalization of academia and its preoccupation with quantifiable productivity and efficiency pushes us to speed up and to smooth over (or to avoid altogether) the meandering and halting that, as Deleuze suggests, is often precisely what opens up new ways of making sense.

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