The creative power in the failure of word and language
on silence, stuttering and other performative intensities

Prof. Dr. Christel Stalpaert
Ghent University
Belgium

> We are nothing, we have nothing, poor militants of a shadow of ten times nothing, all empty hands and gaping mouths. And the expectation of a stammered word, that is to say, a word that is long in gestation.
>
> -Pieter De Buysser-

For Marcus Fabius Quintilianus (±35 - ±100 BC), the Roman rhetorician who wrote *De Institutione oratoria*, a standard work in the area of rhetoric or the art of eloquence, stammering or stuttering is inconceivable: "unless the voice is free of defect, it cannot produce the best delivery" (V: XI.3.13). A well educated man is able to cultivate 'general communication skills'; they help him to express himself easily, speak fluently and use language correctly. The fundamental tasks Quintilian elucidated as part of classical eloquence include the correct putting into words or *elocutio* and the correct presentation or *actio*. A 'good' style has three kinds of excellence; correctness, lucidity, elegance and appropriateness. A rightly dosed style is a guideline here. Monotony and excess are to be avoided. An unchanging style and a constantly repetitive one are deadly dull. Language ought to be in balance and equilibrium.

Stammering is unheard of in the art of good speaking

Demosthenes (384-322 BC), the Greek orator, lawyer and politician, whom we know to have been physically weak and to have stammered, is therefore not the prototype of what Quintilian understood by a good orator. Even so he plays an important role in Quintilian's arguments. Despite his 'rhetorical shortcomings', Demosthenes built a successful career in 4th century Greece. He was a brilliant lawyer and an active, combative politician. His *Philippics* were viewed as standard examples of rhetorical accusations, and when he fought in the Battle of Chaeronea, he was given the honour of giving the funeral peroration for the fallen. Quintilian ascribes his success to his self-discipline and perseverance. Zealous study and dogged perseverance enabled Demosthenes to overcome his 'physical shortcomings'. Quintilian refers in this context to the value of untiring exercise. "We must (…) train our breathing to last as long as possible. For this purpose Demosthenes used to recite as many lines as he could without pausing while walking uphill. He also used to roll pebbles under his tongue when practising at home, in order to improve his articulation (V: XI.3.54).

With Foucault's discourse analysis a different, modern perspective is given to us on the subject. The discourse woven around Demosthenes fits into the normalization and disciplining mechanism that has the person deviating from the constructed norm adapt to it. In other words Demosthenes is promoted from a stutterer to a function of exemplar of how underdeveloped persons and those with physical shortcomings can still attain the norm. Eloquence is therefore not just a matter of *speaking*, but also one of discursive power mechanisms: who is entitled to speak and – perhaps more important – to express themselves.
In this option eloquence is not only a form of speaking but also -- and foremost -- a higher form of civilization. Quintilian's *The Orator's Education* "in fact embodies the fundamental

'humanist' ideal of the widely developed, morally good and actively busy human being. The good orator is nothing more nor less than the ideal Roman" (Hunink 675). "*No one* can be an orator *unless* he is a good man", Quintilian says (V: XII.1.3). Eloquence and moral qualities strengthen each other.

The ideal of the Enlightenment of the broadly developed, fluently speaking, active and busy human being is still part of the western paradigm. The conception of 'not having a ready tongue' is too easily associated with a lack of eloquence, with fear of speaking, lack of courage, determination or argumentational skills, and feelings of inferiority. In other words with stuttering. In the dominant clinical discourse, for example in the DSM-IV, stammering is still viewed as a developmental disturbance, a shortcoming, that prevents people from attaining a higher form of civilization.[1] In this sense, Demosthenes' case is still relevant today. The fact that Julie Andrews in the family film *Mary Poppins* specializes in tongue-twisters like "Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious" in reeducating the children is not as innocent as it looks. Nor is it an accident that the stammering cartoon film mouse Speedy Gonzales that the Warner Brothers gave birth to in the fifties, was a Mexican mouse. Mexican immigrants and other Spanish-speaking Americans were dismayed at this denigrating parody: "Warner Brothers made a good deal of money from mocking people who did not speak standard English." (Shell 92) In Shaw's *Pygmalion* the same reeducating discourse is at work. The way Henry Higgins, a professor of phonetics, teaches a Cockney flower girl, Eliza Doolittle, to speak her way up to the upper class, is symptomatic for similar denigrating mechanisms of power.

When stammering is a thing unheard of, we must in other words also ask whether this is 'a thing unheard of' in the sense of 'unesteemed, not respected', or 'a thing unheard of' in the sense of 'unobserved, unperceived', entailing an unwillingness of the listener to really listen, beyond the borders of his or her own norms. In Don DeLillo's *The Body Artist*, the conception of 'not having a ready tongue' is conceived within the broader paradigm of someone else's unwillingness to listen, rather than within the denigrating paradigm of someone's inability to speak 'properly'. This produces surprising twists. *The Body Artist* is the story of the young artist Lauren, living in a rambling rented house somewhere on the New England Coast where she is trying to come to terms with the suicide of her husband Ray. In this she is helped by a strange, ageless man whom she finds in the house on her return from the funeral. The man uses language is a disquieting way:

> 'I know how much.' He said, 'I know how much this house. Alone by the sea.'
> He looked not pleased exactly but otherwise satisfied, technically satisfied to have managed the last cluster of words. And it was in fact, coming from Mr. Tuttle, a formulation she heard in its echoing depths. Four words only. But he'd placed her in a set of counter-surroundings, of simultaneous onsides and outsides. The house, the sea-planet outside it, and how the word *alone* referred to her and to the house, and how the word *sea* reinforced the idea of solitude but suggested a vigorous release as well, a means of escape from the book-walled limits of the self.

---

[1] In DSM-IV stammering is categorized under developmental disturbances. Stammering is stated to be due to a brain coordination disorder, making stammerers unable to fluently articulate their thoughts. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) is an American manual for the diagnosis and statistics of physical disorders which is used in psychiatry in most countries. The current version is the fourth edition, referred to as DSM-IV.

> She knew it was foolish to examine so closely. She was making things
> up. But this was the effect he had, **shadow-inching through a
> sentence**, showing a word in its facets and aspects, **words like moons
> in particular phases.**
> (…)
> He talked about objects in the room, **stumblingly**, and she wondered
> what he saw, or failed to see, or saw so differently she could never
> begin to conjure its outlines.
> He talked. After a while she began to understand what she was
> hearing. It took many levels of perception. **It took whole social
> histories of how people listen to what other people say.** (DeLillo 48,
> 50, emphasis mine, C.S.)

Attention to the sensitivity of the language that stammerers bring forth is also the question in
a testimony by Flemish media figure Luckas Vander Taelen, who describes himself as "the
red-haired stammerer with flappy ears and little glasses". This stigmatization, which took
shape mainly from a dominant discourse, was offset in the course of time by an insight into
the creativity with which he was forced to deal with language. An insight "that I could hear
how they sometimes went looking at the last moment for synonyms to avoid a difficult word.
Or that sometimes they very ingeniously gave their whole sentence an unexpected twist. In
this way I discovered the first feature of stammerers: they know the value of words. Every
word they speak has been tested and examined from every side. (...) Only they know the
physical feeling, the testing almost of letters and words. Words like wild animals to be
tamed." (*Het Nieuwsblad*, 2006)

This sensitivity to language is a quality that French post-structuralist Gilles Deleuze raises
into style in his essay *He Stuttered*. Deleuze frequently referred to the creative stammering of
writers such as Samuel Beckett and Ghérasim Luca to elaborate his aesthetics of intensities,
which was to dismantle the logocentric paradigm and its rigid conception of language. Of
Luca, the surrealist theorist and Romanian poet, he said that he was "a great poet among the
greatest: he invented a prodigious stammering, his own".[2] (Deleuze, *Dialogues II* 3. See also
Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* 108 and Deleuze, *He Stuttered* 111-112) The
content Deleuze gives to his concept of 'style' in the meaning of 'virtues of style' I would like
in this contribution to place alongside that of Quintilian, together with Samuel Beckett's
stutter poem *Comment dire / what is the word* (1988) and the stutter opera *L'opéra bègue /
Stotteropera* (2004) by Flemish theatre-maker and playwright Pieter De Buysser and the
music theatre company Het Muziek Lod as reference points.

The stuttering language

Deleuze's merit lies not only in uncoupling the phenomenon of 'stuttering' from the negative,
clinical sphere, and presenting it as a critical-creative process, but also in seeing stuttering not
as an aspect of speech ('parole'), but as an immanent quality of language ('langage') itself,
thereby resolutely dismantling the linguistic paradigm established by Ferdinand de Saussure
and his *Course in General Linguistics*.

A key principle of the Saussaurian model is the difference made in language ('langage')
between 'tongue' ('language') and 'word' ('speech'). The first term refers in the traditional

---

[2] I would like to thank John Neubauer for pointing this out to me.

semiotic concept to the abstract social language system ('language') that precedes each individual use thereof. For de Saussure this abstract system is a relatively closed and more or less stable system that is used to formulate concrete expressions that are unsystematic, more or less accidental and temporary in nature ('speech'). Where a stutter occurs, this can take place according to the linguistic paradigm only at the level of language use or 'speech'. With the hierarchical distinction that de Saussure made to the benefit of 'language' as something higher than incidental 'speech', stuttering is at the level of language use a 'different' something from which the overarching language as 'langage' must be protected. For de Saussure the abstract social language system ('language') precedes 'speech', and therefore remains free from stuttering. It is this closed and relatively stable system that makes language ('langage') an usable instrument, an appropriate communication tool of a community: "for if we wish to demonstrate that the rules a community accepts are imposed upon it, and not freely agreed to, it is a language which offers the most striking proof". (De Saussure 71)

The preference for the essential aspect of the language system also brings with it a preference for synchronic linguistics. From his essentialist approach de Saussure is obviously more interested in the logical concordances and the systematic aspect of the collective consciousness of synchronic linguistics than in the differential aspects of diachronic linguistics. The latter for him simply studies "connections between sequences of items not perceived by the same collective consciousness, which replace one another without themselves constituting a system" (98). Poststructuralists read de Saussure's paradigm as essentialist thinking that denies difference. They criticized the a-historical approach to language controlled by a closed and stable language system. Frederic Jameson among others criticizes the gulf that de Saussure created between the synchronic and diachronic approach, thereby turning language into a claustrophobic prison: "Once you have begun by separating the diachronic from the synchronic (…) you can never really put them back together again", says Jameson (18). In his book with the highly suggestive title *The Prison-House of Language* he therefore considers it necessary to "free structural analysis from the myth of structure itself, of some permanent and spatial-like organization of the object" (216).

Gilles Deleuze too gives short shrift to de Saussure's linguistic paradigm, which he only too gladly dismantles. In so doing he is no proponent of the counter-strategy of revaluing language use ('speech') to the detriment of language system ('language'). Indeed, anyone who inverts a paradigm, placing plus signs where minus signs previously stood and vice-versa, remains unavoidably determined by the structure and system of the paradigm. The signs remain in the same place, even if a plus becomes a minus and a minus a plus. Deleuze undertakes an dehierarchization operation as a scope-broadening strategy. He abandons the hierarchical difference between language system and language use, allowing the linguistic limitations of 'language' as system to come to the surface and showing language to be less stable than de Saussure would have us believe.[3]
Within this scope-widening operation Deleuze sees stuttering not as a feature of an individual speaker, but as a possible condition of language itself. In other words, stuttering is not language use ('speech') but an inherent feature of language ("language"). When language has its linguistic yoke removed, you have room to dance again. The language system is a

---

[3] This change in perspective is a broad trend at the time. Mikhail Bakhtin, for example, also argued that the idea of language as a closed, self-consistent system is an ideological construct. He introduced the term 'heteroglossia' to describe the internal stratification and differentiation within language. That what we call language is in fact made up of many different, mutually contradictory languages, says Bakhtin in his essay *Discourse in the Novel* (262-263).

construction of linguistics, awaking the illusion that language is a homogenous system in equilibrium, in which unambiguous communication is possible and users can use words efficiently and unambiguously. But this is a construction that filters away every possibility of experiment. Language itself is in fact in perpetual disequilibrium or bifurcation. In its signification it is constantly dancing from one pile of significances to another.

> for linguistics, a language [langue] is always a system in balance (…)
> And the rest, the variations, are placed no longer on the side of
> language, but on the side of speech [parole]. language [langue] is a
> system (…) far from equilibrium, a system in perpetual imbalance,
> such that there is no difference of level between language and speech,
> but language is constituted by all sorts of heterogeneous currents in
> disequilibrium with one another.[4]

Language is not a reliable tree structure, but a challenging rhizome. In that sense the "shadow-inching through a sentence", the showing of "words like moons in particular phases (DeLillo), the unexpected twists in a sentence, and the "testing of letters and words, examining them from all sides" (Vander Taelen) are closer to Deleuze's extended vision than the exercised, eloquent orator (Quintilian). The many levels of perception that a stuttering style calls for requires a degree of creative thinking going well beyond the borders of de Saussure's language theory.

The liberating power of poetic style

The liberation from the linguistic yoke or the expansion of the scope of language occur for Deleuze in a poetic speech "that actualizes these powers of bifurcation and variation, of heterogenesis and modulation, that are proper to language" (*He Stuttered* 108). This is the language of the poet. In her introduction to the recent issue of *Yang* on the theme of stuttering, Sarah Posman cites in this context the following pronouncement by Flemish poet Paul Van Ostaijen: "I speak with difficulty like all those people who suffer from the accursed running of the words behind the thought. After not seeing each other for seven years, one of my brother's first comments was: you have a sort of difficulty around your mouth, as if you had a speech defect. (This, dear Stan, if for me one of the most reassuring explanations I have ever heard: the poet speaks as if he does not want to come out with his message" (translation mine, 15, fn. 15).

Deleuze himself goes as far as to state that "Being well spoken has never been either the distinctive feature of the concern of great writers" (*He Stuttered* 111). Didn't Blanchot draw our attention to the paradox of the writer being in the impossible condition of someone who finds himself in an area lying outside the say-able and yet, from there, feels the pressing need to speak, to speak all the time (in De Martelaere 13) Stuttering is in this case not the negation of language, a posture of negativity. It is the creative urge of the necessity to speak despite the short-circuiting effect of rigid language systems, it is pronouncement of the unspeakable not despite, but thanks to the space for stuttering.

Here we think of Samuel Beckett's stutter poem *Comment dire / what is the word*, which evokes the same accursed running of the words behind the thought, and at the same time through stuttering brings to the surface things that language is unable to do. But the poetic

---

[4] Deleuze's ABC Interview from http://www.langlab.wayne.edu/CStivale/D-G/ABC1.html and http://www.people.fas.harvard.edu/~wrankin/deleuzeABC.html

language that Deleuze is referring to is not limited to poetry as a genre. Poetic language can, of course, 'infect' any genre. Here I am not talking about stories or plays in which characters stammer or are unable to get their words out. I am not talking about Billy Bud in Herman Melville's eponymous novel who stutters when he has to speak under pressure. Nor am I referring to Porky Pig, the stuttering cartoon film hero of the fifties, who concludes every cartoon with a "Th-th that's all f-f-f-olks". There are countless examples of texts in which characters stammer and are unable to get their words out. What I am concerned with here are those texts where the efforts of such people are intended to make the language as such stutter.

In Pieter De Buysser's *L'Opéra bègue / Stotteropera*, Isis is a stuttering young girl who on the eve of her marriage suddenly discovers that a tree is growing in her throat. The representation is a gay but also wry observation of the way her family and fiancé react to her becoming a tree and losing all her language. In this sense, the opera is a commentary on the failure of language to express itself in appropriate identities. Being-different within binary-oppositional patterns is doomed to silence. That which is different, apart, is unable to speak, cannot express itself. In this sense, Isis' stuttering is an act of resistance, an attempt to break through the stifling language system and the closed concepts labeling her. But at the same time in the stutter opera, the language itself is infected by the appearance and behavior of the characters. A transfer from the form of content to the form of expression is brought about. Language too stutters, lurches and pitches. "It is as if the entire language started to roll from right to left, and to pitch backward and forward: *the two stutterings*." (Deleuze, *He Stuttered* 110) It is not only or no longer the character that is stuttering in his speech or *parole*. Pieter de Buysser is as author himself a stutterer in the language as language (*langue*). The outcome is "an affective and intensive language" (Deleuze, *He Stuttered* 107). In this sense the stutter opera is simultaneously a piece about the power of failure. "A stutterer has a communication problem, but behind this maybe lies concealed a particular beauty and poetry." (Translation mine, Versteele 32-34)

Isis not only says "A. ar. Ar. Ar. Arbre (…) i i illll p p p poupousse" or "Sses ra raciness piquent et cha cha chatoui toui chatouillent ma gorge. " (De Buysser 19) With her language use she not only infects the other characters, but also the language itself; "c'est seulement la pauvreté de la language qui nous rend incompréhensibles" (it is only the poverty of language that makes us incomprehensible) she says later, unleashing the following poetic word stream on the audience:

> Here I am, someone else, back again. I don't fit in. Say, papa (…).
> Look at yourselves, lying under your copies of trees, poor creatures,
> nice soldiers. Troops of a shadow of nothing.
> Stop moving around, papa, or is it too heavy? My big silly-billy. My
> tree was not real.
> Is that hard for you to hear?
> Sorry, but it's like that. Language risks breaking apart when I try to
> bury myself above in the highest abyss. And yet: I am trying to speak
> about what is not a thing without speaking of nothing (…)
> I want to speak about that which is without being. Out of a profound
> dislike of all the aestheticians of history who, day in, day out, turn
> today's trivial words into eternal values. (…)

Words are exhausted. I would like, so like to be able to speak about where the dark light lives. I would like to be able to speak from what makes trees grow. But my mouth is here. (De Buysser 85-87)[5]

Modulations as zones of variation of words

As he analyzes his version of 'good' style in greater detail, Deleuze points to a number of features. These stylistic tools are not to be interpreted as components of a pragmatic, market-oriented manual on 'how to achieve a good style'. Deleuze's aesthetic of intensities cannot be read as a summary of dogmas to be followed uncritically. Deleuze does not prescribe how we have to think or write. Rather he tells us how open our attitude should be in order to be able to think and write in another, broader way, for example with an eye to keeping open the many levels of perception mentioned in DeLillo's book. Deleuze offers no firm foundations, but carries us to the borders of our thought. Stuttering, lurching and silence can then demolish Quintilian's artificial interventions.

A first feature of a Deleuzian 'good style' has to do with modulations as zones of variation of words. Ferdinand de Saussure's structural model insists on the idea of a two-sided linguistic sign consisting of a signal (*signifiant*) and a signification (*signifié*) (66ff). Here the signal is the material aspect of the sign; its sound or its written form, signification is the concept or the idea, also referred to as the mental concept. De Saussure defines the sign as the connection between a form that signifies– the signal – and the idea that is signified– signification. In so doing he emphases the arbitrary relationship between the signal and the signification, that is the unmotivated connection between the two halves of the sign: "the signal is *unmotivated*, that is to say arbitrary in relation to its signification, with which it has no natural connexion in reality" (De Saussure 69). There is no 'natural' link between a signal and a signification. Their relationship is totally conventional and can operate solely within the relatively closed and stable system of linguistics, within a social consensus.
It is a commonly-known fact that Deleuze swapped de Saussure's semiotics for that of Peirce, for the above-mentioned reasons. In his *He Stuttered* he also quotes linguist Gustave Guillaume in order to indicate – contrary to what de Saussure maintained – that every term of the language system should be seen, not as a constant in relation to other terms, but as "a series of differential positions or points of view on a specifiable dynamism" (109). The dynamism Deleuze is speaking of is the variation zones of words. A particular article can, within such a variation zone, have an indefinite or generalising thrust, and vice versa, an indefinite article can have a particularizing thrust. This is what Deleuze understands by the poetic use of language; a stuttering in which every position of the word gives off a vibration. "Language trembles from head to toe." A sentence is no longer simply a grammatical construction, but also an "infinitely varied line" (Deleuze, *He Stuttered* 109).

---

[5] Translation mine from French "Me voilà une autre, une fois de plus. Je n'adhère pas. Dis, papa (…) Regardez-vous, couchés sous vos copies d'arbres, pauvres créatures, gentils soldats. Militants d'une ombre de rien. Arrête de bouger, papa, ou bien est-il trop lourd ? Mon gros bêta. Mon arbre était sans être. Ça te fait mal aux oreilles? Je regrette, c'est comme ça. La langue risque d'éclater quand j'essaye de m'enfoncer en haut dans l'abîme du plus élevé. Et pourtant : j'essaye de parler de non pas une chose sans parler de rien. (…) Je veux parler de ce qui est sans être. Par horreur des esthéticiens de l'histoire qui font de la parole du jour, jour après jour, une valeur de l'éternité. (…) Les mots sont épuisés. J'aimerais, j'aimerais pouvoir parler d'où la lumière obscure séjourne. J'aimerais pouvoir parler depuis ce qui fait pousser les arbres. Mais ma bouche est ici." (De Buysser 85-87)

For Deleuze, great writers "make the language take flight, they send it racing along a witch's line, ceaselessly placing it in a state of disequilibrium, making it bifurcate and vary in each of its terms, following an incessant modulation. This exceeds the possibilities of speech and attains the power of language, or even of language in its entirety." (*He Stuttered* 109) This syntax in the process of becoming generates a grammar of imbalance. This is not just the property of poetry, but something immanently present in language, and therefore potentially also in theatre and opera. One can see how De Buysser in the above-quoted fragment is trying out the variation zones of the words 'être' (*be*), 'rien' (*anything*), 'parler' (*speak*) and 'jour' (*day*), and in the rhythm of his repeats is taking the language out of its unambiguous, functional balance. You know what it is all about, and you can follow the presentation, but even so you cannot grasp the whole. There remains in the interpretation of the words at all times a remainder that threatens the social consensus and common sense. Words are no longer a mould or template of a particular content, they generate modulations.

A pure dance of words out of balance

Let us go further into the concept of balance that Quintilian rates so highly and Deleuze dismantles as a restrictive construction. Poetic language is given room to dance, and even to get out of balance with a swerving, lurching style. One character who in is his own way dances and swings through such a language is Mr Knott in Beckett's *Watt*. Deleuze states that the way Knott walks, puts on his shoes, moves around the furniture, and walks around his room, is marked by "an ineffable manner of walking, while rolling and pitching". (Deleuze, *He Stuttered* 111) It is a body that moves in a very peculiar way, the description of which calls for a language that in turn is out of balance and dances.

> Watt's way of advancing due east, for example, was to turn his bust
> as far as possible towards the north and at the same time to fling out
> his right leg as far as possible towards the south, and then to turn his
> bust as far as possible towards the south and at the same time to fling
> out his left leg as far as possible towards the north, and then again to
> turn his bust as far as possible towards the north and to fling out his
> right leg as far as possible towards the south, and then again to turn
> his bust as par as possible towards the south and to fling out his left
> leg as far as possible towards the north, and so on, over and over
> again, many many times, until he reached his destination, and could
> sit down. (Beckett, *Watt* 28)

Quintilian would call the many repetitions here an unbalanced, incorrectly dosed style. Too many repeats pull a language out of balance and destroy its functionality and conviction. For Deleuze, the rhythm in the creative repeat is rather a style that not only describes, but also evokes Mr Knott's specific way of moving.

Watt's way of walking is usually described as clown-like, as an "ongoing, chaotic compromise between the dimensions of up and down, left and right." However, it is not the clown-like movements, but the constant situation of imbalance that in fact allows Watt to move forward. The impulse for moving (forward) and progress is in fact the possibility of falling. Steven Connor writes about Watt:

> In order for Watt to move, to become a 'headlong tardigrade', there must
> be an inaugural leaning, or movement of falling forward. Watt must be

and remain off balance, pulled forward towards the ground, for the
action of walking to begin and continue. (84)

In this context, stammering can also be understood as a movement of words falling forward, based on imbalance in the language. Stuttering can therefore be understood not as a cessation of speech, but as generating a constant becoming. "The idea that we move forward stutteringly, that it is where things break apart, in the faultlines, in hesitation and uncertainty, that we really learn", was, according to producer Dominique Roodthooft, what *L'Opéra bègue / Stotteropera* was all about (in Flament). It is not about damaging of language, but about creative progess(ion) having imbalance as its starting point.

It is in this sense that Bruce Nauman paid homage to out-of-balance walking in his *Slow Angle Walk (Beckett Walk)* (1968). In this piece Nauman recorded himself with a video recorder whilst slowly and with alienating precision walking a marked path in his studio. His arms are held in an unnatural position along his back. He lifts up his right leg and forwards and – when it comes down – does the same with his left leg. This walking gains an unbalanced character, the more so as the video-recorder is set at an angle. It is as if Nauman is walking on a wall, free from gravity. The flowing movement is out of balance, but generates also an effect of liberation. These steps remind us of the 'footfalls' replacing the 'footsteps' in Samuel Beckett's poem *Neither* (1962).[6] The flowing movement has made way for a marked combination of steps, as a creative stuttering in movement.

> beckoned back and forth and turned
> away
>
> heedless of the way, intent on the one
> gleam or the other
>
> unheard footfalls only sound
>
> till at last halt for good, absent for
> good from self and other
>
> then no sound
>
> then gently light unfading on that
> unheeded neither
>
> unspeakable home (Hertmans 231)

A similar creative stuttering in movement is what the players in *L'Opéra bègue / Stotteropera* are doing. Natural acting -- in the sense of psychologically motivated interpretation -- was not required. Nor was this possible. The actors/singers were moving on white mattresses, a few lengths wide, various layers on top of each other. In this way their balance is sometimes lost, often when they let go emotionally. And whilst this imbalance is also a good metaphor for a stuttering language, the effect goes further than that. Even if the falling itself is soft, the

---

[6] Beckett, Samuel. "Neither." *Uncollected and Later Prose. As the Story is Told*, 1980. See also Stefan Hertmans' attempts to translate the poem into Dutch in Hertmans, Stefan. "Geen van beide." *Het putje van Milete. Essays*. Amsterdam: Meulenhoff, 2002. 230-249.

potential fall is *per se* an eye-opener. Beyond the construction of characters and narration, the spectator sees the corporality of the player in his or her fight with gravity. "The stage becomes a cakewalk, "un sol instable" (Lebrun) instead of a foundation out of which a character grows. Confronted with the combination of jagged movements, various levels of perception are sharpened in the spectator's mind. We see not only an attractive stage play, but also the building blocks of illusionistic (music) theatre.

A stuttering language out of balance

Sharpening the various levels of perception is in fact also what Deleuze has in mind with his 'unbalanced' style of creative stuttering. A sentence grows like a rhizome instead of a tree. "Creative stuttering is what makes language grow from the middle, like grass"; it becomes a "vertical thickness" (Deleuze, *He Stuttered* 111) connected to the horizontal axis of the sentence, making us question the 'naturalness' of an unambiguously forward-moving sentence and the attendant rigid language system.

Stuttering as a stylistic medium is for Deleuze in fact a form of reflexive connections. Connections – the consecution of combinables – are progressive within the logic of language. "We do not combine a word with its own elements"; in stuttering there is a reflexive connection that deregulates the carefully constructed balance. "Every word is combined, but with itself (*pas-passe-passion*)". (Deleuze, *He Stuttered* 110) Stuttering allows language to grow out of the middle and can take place in various ways. By going through the variation zones of a particular word, by using repeats of the same term in stuttering, of the beginnings or ends of the word, or by placing it on the dissecting table with other words by means of grammar. Words can be torn apart or left untouched in the repetition, but the result is the same: a vertical layering is added to the horizontal axis of language.

The stylistic virtue of the connection is reflexive, its sharpens levels of perception and has to do, in other words, with the request for an attitude, a willingness of the spectator to be ready to encounter the 'otherness' beyond his or her own boundaries. And this is precisely what stuttering language needs in order to be "heard": readiness and receptiveness. 'Not having a ready tongue' becomes in this way a metaphor for the fragility of the voice that generates another aesthetic than Beauty or size, and which in its fragility generates the power to speak to new levels of perception. Roodthooft states: "I like this idea of fragility. Less from the perspective of weakness than that of a certain permeability" (Flament).

Foreign language in one's own language

Deleuze's version of the 'good' and 'beautiful' style as poetic language is the nonstyle of a Proustian foreign language within language. "Great books are written in a kind of foreign language", he states, quoting Proust, at the start of his collection of *Essays Critical and Clinical*. This 'nonstyle' does not, however, form an anti-strategy in the sense of being external to language (Deleuze, *He Stuttered* 112). To allow language to stutter is to create the "foreign language within language" (Deleuze, *He Stuttered* 113). Deleuze emphasizes repeatedly that the foreignness of language has nothing to do with bilingualism or multilingualism: "We can easily conceive of two languages mixing with each other, with incessant transitions from one to another; yet each of them nonetheless remains a homogenous system in equilibrium, and their mixing takes place in speech."

The bilingualism that both Beckett and De Buysser use as authors must also be seen in this context. The two languages are not mixed in their works. Beckett was an Irishman who often wrote in French. His poem *Comment dire*, for example, he translated shortly before his death into English– *What is the word*. But he always felt like a foreigner in the language in which he expressed himself, even if it was his native tongue. The situation of balance that the language system of whatever language aims for always has a constricting effect. Beckett "does not mix another language with his own language, he carves out a non-preexistent foreign language *within* his own language" (Deleuze, *He Stuttered* 110). The production of *L'Opéra bègue / Stotteropera* in French, with Dutch supertitling is in the same spirit. The languages do not mix. When Pieter De Buysser has Isis say in the course of the play that it is through the poverty of language that we gain the illusion of being understandable, he is referring to the suffocating yoke of the linguistic paradigm in every language, both in his native language and in the French language in which the play is performed.

Stutter theatre as a contemporary form of political theatre?

One can say that *L'Opéra bègue / Stotteropera* puts across a message. One newspaper titled its review of the performance "this is an ode to the impossibility of adapting". (Vereenooghe) Franz Kafka's *Die Verwandlung* (Metamorphosis) was not by chance a source of inspiration. In it, office clerk Gregor Samsa suddenly wakes up as a beetle, and runs into the incomprehension – not being understood – of the society around him. De Buysser has taken over the idea of metamorphosis in his stutter opera: it is because Isis is unable to find herself in the identity that marriage has imposed on her that a tree grows out her throat. But the end is consciously different. Whilst in Kafka the monstrous beetle, symbol of the disturbing and unheard-of eccentric outside of society, is shut out from society, we have in the stutter opera a radical acceptance of the transformation. Dominique Roodthooft and Pieter De Buysser place, over and against Kafka a fable "in which metamorphosis works as a spark for transforming the established order" (Translation mine, Vereenooghe). Translating this into political language, De Buysser is in fact pleading "for another form of behaviour towards foreigners and 'outsiders'" (Translation mine, Vereenooghe). The critics got the message. Pol Arias endorsed that the performance led him to think, in a ludic and very changing way, of how difference can lead just as well to inclusion as to exclusion.

But the performance is more than the message. The spectator is not just the target of a ready-to-eat bit of moral preaching. One could say that this performance is 'political' and 'committed' in the sense that it leaves the spectator stuttering. When does a performance leave me lost for words? Bojana Cvejic asked this question when reflecting on the sense and nonsense of "politics and criticism". In Deleuzian terms she described how the uneven effects were important for her, those moments in which theory and practice force each other into de-territorialization.

> De-territorialization does not mean that one conquers the domain of the other, but that one finds oneself on the border of each others' territory, that one has to relate to what lies outside one. When does a production leave me stuttering? And when does it speak so fluently, so tellingly and explicitly that my interpretation seems redundant and the performance writes itself? (Translation mine, 8)

The performance that leaves me stuttering has in other words also an ethical dimension. It is a finger exercise in tactile experience, in exploratory meeting and in creative thinking, instead of cognitive recognition, conceptual appropriation and biased labeling.

Pieter De Buysser's stutter opera does not aim at any comfortable spectator position. It forces spectators to stutter in their interpretation and to lose their own identities. "Neither the players nor the public feel immediately comfortable with it, and that's a good thing", Roodthooft says, "It can well shock a bit." (Translation mine, in Flament) This is due not just to the stuttering words, but also to the fact that Isis – thanks to her constant transformation into becoming – cannot be pinned down and as such does not lend herself to the traditional identification pattern and catharsis of classical dramatic aesthetics. "Once again I am someone else", Isis sings in *L'Opéra bègue / Stotteropera*, in so doing underlining her ungraspable identity. (Translation mine, De Buysser 85) The stutterer is not (only) a foreigner in his own language, but also and in particular "a traitor" according to Bojana Cvejic; "a traitor who dismantles (…) standard interpretations in order to break open imbedded opinions and to reach areas where there are no memories." (Translation mine, 8)

Can we use the term political performances for performances that leave the spectator stuttering? Yes and no. For essayist and philosopher Jacques Rancière "The dream of a suitable political work of art is in fact the dream of disrupting the relationship between the visible, the sayable and the thinkable without having to use the terms of a message as a vehicle" (63). Art is not political in its message, nor in the identities it puts forward or the feelings it invokes concerning social and political questions. Political art is not the area of the pamphleteer. "The 'fictions' of art and politics are therefore heterotopias rather than utopias." (41) Here art remains stuck in the pragmatic aspects of the exposition, in the rhetorical force of the word.

Rancière considered the long and contradictory history of rhetoric and the model of the 'good orator' and its contradictory political paradigms. "It was (…) receptive (…) to the recovery of its democratic function by lending its canonical forms and its consecrated images to the transgressive appearance of unauthorized speakers on the public stage." He noticed how the democratic paradigm became a monarchical paradigm; "Throughout the monarchical age, democratic eloquence à la Demosthenes denoted an excellence in speaking, which was itself established as the imaginary attribute of the supreme power." (18) Since the appearance of classical Athenian democracy of the 5th and 4th centuries BC, general skills in "public speaking" were seen as a sign of political evolution. Eloquence was linked with gatherings of the people and jury trials. In Roman history too - and until Cicero's time Rome was a republic - rhetoric was indissolubly linked to political decision-making and speeches.
Rhetoric belongs to the realm of the *police*; "an organizational system of coordinates that establishes a distribution of the sensible". It is the law that "presupposes a prior aesthetic division between the visible and the invisible, the audible and the inaudible, the sayable and the unsayable" (Rockhill 3). Political speaking in the meaning of Rancière's *police* is directed in this case at a particular objective. It is the art of the discussable. Art on the other hand exercises the politics of the inexpressable. Art becomes politics by distancing itself from the rhetoric of the word. Pieter De Buysser sees critics, journalists and theatre-makers as being responsible for tracing the power mechanisms of political oratory and stripping them of their self-evident authenticity; "listening carefully to what they say, and constantly taking the temperature of prevailing social trends, of the presuppositions with which they live and which they can reinforce with their words" (Translation mine, Versteele 33). When a tree comes growing out of Isis's mouth, this is because she refuses to be the identity imposed upon her,

and to participate in what philosopher Jacques Rancière called "the sensible." It is an elementary form of resistance.

Rancière examines politics from the perspective of 'the distribution of the sensible'. "Politics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of spaces and the possibilities of time." (13) In Rancière's opinion artistic practices are political as soon as, by taking a standpoint, they take part in the discursive game of distribution and redistribution of time and space, place and identity. They are political in the sense that they "are 'ways of doing and making' that intervene in the general distribution of ways of doing and making as well as in the relationships they maintain to modes of being and forms of visibility. (…) the indetermination of identities, the delegitimation of positions of speech, the deregulation of partitions of space and time". (13-14)

That *L'Opéra bègue / Stotteropera* takes part in a certain recasting of the distribution of the sensible is certain, in the sense that Pieter De Buysser removes the conventions of sense experience and gives new form to and deforms the network of connections between time and space, subject and object, what is social and what is individual. In his own words De Buysser sees a challenge in making visible, not in putting forward a point of view. "Our existence [is] a comedy of simplifications", he says "Theatre is precisely the hope-filled dirty trick that you can play on day-to-day comedy" (Translation mine, *Etcetera*, 10-11). Stutter theatre as a traitor, a traitor who cannot be dumbed down to the level of the anecdotal.

<div align="center">Works Cited</div>

Bakthin, Mikhail. "Discourse in the Novel." *The Dialogic Imagination. Four Essays by M. M. Bakthin.*ed. M. Holquist. Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1981.

Beckett, Samuel. *Watt*. London: John Calden, 1963

---. "Comment dire / what is the word." *Poems 1930-1989*. London: Calder Publications, 2002. 112-115.

Bussels, Stijn. *Van macht en mensenwerk. Retorica als performatieve strategie in de Antwerpse intocht van 1549*. Gent: Universiteit Gent, 2005.

Connor, Steven. "Shifting Ground / Auf schwankendem Boden." *Samuel Beckett / Bruce Nauman*. Vienna: Kunsthalle Wien, 2000. 80-87.

Cvejic, Bojana. "Stotteren, springen en wegvluchten van 'zelfschrijving'." *Etcetera* 95 (2005): 8-10.

De Buysser, Pieter. *La pousse des arbres. Opgevoerd als L'Opéra Bègue*. script, [2005].---. "Een ongehouden wonde, een open belofte." *Etcetera* 97 (2005): 10-11.

Deleuze, Gilles. *L'Abécédaire de Gilles Deleuze, interview avec Claire Parnet*. Ed. Pierre André Boutang. Paris: Editions Montparnasse, 2004.

---. **ABC Interview** from http://www.langlab.wayne.edu/CStivale/D-G/ABC1.html and http://www.people.fas.harvard.edu/~wrankin/deleuzeABC.html

---. "He Stuttered." *Essays Clinical and Critical*. Trans. Daniel W. Smith and Michael A. Greco Minneapolis. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997. 107-114.

Deleuze, Gilles and Félix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus*. Transl. Brian Massumi. London: Continuum, 2004.

Deleuze, Gilles and Claire Parnet. *Dilogues II*. Transl. Hugh Tomlinson, Barbara Habberjam and Eliot Ross Albert. London: Continuum, 2006.

deLillo, Don. *The Body Artist*. London: Picador, 2002.

De Martelaere, Patricia. *Een verlangen naar ontroostbaarheid: over leven, de kunst en de dood*. Amsterdam: Meulenhoff, 1993.

De Saussure, Ferdinand. *Course in General Linguistics*. Trans. Roy Harris. London: Duckworth, 1983.

Flament, Xavier. "Le bégaiement, une parole en devenir." *Le soir* 3 Dec. 2004.

Hertmans, Stefan. "Geen van beide ." *Het putje van Milete. Essays*. Amsterdam: Meulenhoff, 2002. 230-249.

Hunink, Vincent. "In de leer bij Quintilianus." *Streven* 2001: 675-688.

Jameson, Fredric. *The Prison-house of Language: a Critical Account of Structuralism and Russian Formalism*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972.

Kant, Immanuel. "Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung?" *Berlinische Monatsschrift* Dec. 1784: 481-94.

Lebrun, Sophie. "Un arbre pousse, et tout se transforme." *La libre gazette de Liège* 8 Dec. 2004.M.B. "L'Opéra bègue ou la métamorphose." *Gazette de Liège* 29 Nov. 2004.

Quintilian. *The Orator's Education*. Trans. H.E. Butler. 5 vols. London: William Heinemann. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1958-2001. (The Loeb Classical Library)

Posman, Sarah. "Staamren geen zingen. Inleiding." *Yang* 1 (2006): 7-15.Rancière, Jacques. *The Politics of Aesthetics. The Distribution of the Sensible*. Trans. Gabriel Rockhill. London: Continuum, 2004.

Rockhill, Gabriel. "Translator's Preface. The Reconfiguration of Meaning." Rancière, Jacques. *The Politics of Aesthetics. The Distribution of the Sensible*, Trans. Gabriel Rockhill. London: Continuum, 2004. vii-x.---. "Translator's Introduction.

Jacques Rancière's Politics of Perception." Jacques. *The Politics of Aesthetics. The Distribution of the Sensible*. Trans. Gabriel Rockhill. London: Continuum, 2004. 1-6.

Shell, Marc. "Animals that Talk; or, Stutter." *Differenced: a Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 15(2004)1: 84-107.

Vereenooghe, Saskia. "'Dit is een ode aan het onvermogen zich aan te passen': 'stotteropera' benadert gedaanteverwisseling als nieuwe mogelijkheid." *De Tijd* 3 Dec. 2004.

Versteele, Jeroen. "'Ne Vlaming, ça vend, quoi'." *Etcetera* 97 (2005): 32-34.X. "Verenig u en beging te zingen!" *Het Nieuwsblad* 8 Aug. 2006.