

Tarrying Between Speech and Silence: Deferment and Disruption in *Story of a Stammer*

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Abstract

This article explores the ‘minor’ aesthetics and politics of the stammer that operates through narrative resistance in Gábor Vida’s autofictional bildungsroman *Story of a Stammer* (2022). Set within Nicolae Ceaușescu’s oppressive Romanian communist regime, the Hungarian protagonist Gábor’s tale recounts his struggles with speech, silence, and stammering. The article reads the novel alongside Joshua St. Pierre’s

critical history of dysfluency, and Giles Deleuze’s idea of the minor. It considers the stammer as a means of personal and political resistance, a form of counter-archive to cultural scripts and political mechanisms of dominant ‘truth-making,’ and as a gesture that complicates pre-established notions of agency and passivity.

But this isn't a novel and I wasn't a hero despite wanting to be one [...] My world was hopelessly in tatters, seeing that whatever I would have been able to talk about was declared non-existent on a daily basis, and what did exist, I was unable to discuss.

—Gábor Vida, *Story of a Stammer*

A great writer is always like a foreigner in the language in which he expresses himself [...] He carves out a non preexistent foreign language within his own language. He makes the language itself scream, stutter, stammer, or murmur.

—Giles Deleuze, “He Stuttered”

Reading Gábor Vida's autofictional text *Story of a Stammer*, we are confronted by an ecology of ‘but.’ Being the very first word of the novel despite Gábor's father's prepossession that “BUT is not a word we tend to start sentences with,” ‘but’ presents us with a multimodal tensivity that characterises the form and content of the novel (Vida 1).¹ Inherent to this ‘but’ is a sense of recalcitrance, plea, repetition, interruption, stoppage, and deferral. ‘But’ operates in the order of ‘despite,’ ‘without,’ ‘outside,’ ‘except,’ ‘more,’ and ‘else.’ It is a minor gesture where the voice stammers, the sentence becomes dysfluent, and the subject and his language stand foreign and resignified.

In his essay “He Stuttered,” Giles Deleuze argues that the “minor” use of the major language makes the latter stammer, and deterritorialises the dominant power relations enacted and reflected linguistically within it (109). For Deleuze, language constructs socio-political and cultural meaning. The poetics of stuttering (operating through semantic and syntactic disjunctions) reveals precisely this function of language, disrupting its seemingly innocent claim of representation of a pre-existing reality. This paper examines how, in *Story of a Stammer*, stammering functions at the level of language (both metaphorically and stylistically), the narrative, and the protagonist's speech. It becomes the minor gesture that interrogates all three, and consequently, destabilises the conventionally accepted truth of the Romanian communist regime through Vida's own hesitating story that is otherwise expelled from it.

1 While the novel is autofictional, hereon “Vida” is used to refer to the author himself whereas “Gabor” indicates the ‘fictionalised’ version of the author.

Under this communist regime, what is foreign is considered irrelevant to truth. Against this backdrop, the stutter then embodies “a condition in which one wrestles with what has become a foreign tongue” (Vida 29). Gábor’s dysfluency and alienation go hand in hand—within the space of his family, speaking is either prescriptive, explodes, or is silenced under pro-regime and protestant ideologies. Additionally, Hungarians in Romania do not belong in a shared language, history, or memory (Behr 91-175). Parallely, Gábor’s diagnosis insists that his stammering speech “is never right” (Vida 98-99). All of this culminates in a peculiar foreignness of Gábor that is enacted as well as interrogated by his stammer.

This paper listens attentively to the foreignness of Gábor’s stuttering and its “intervocality,” studying the aesthetics of disnarration and the politics of deferment that arises from it. Intervocality highlights how stuttering arises from the hearer’s prejudice against disabled forms of speech (St. Pierre, “Stuttering and Ableism” 294-295). Interestingly, for Deleuze too, the stutter of the language reflects the larger symptom of the forced socio-political ordering by the dominant forces of power. Following this, one can locate the stutter in Vida’s socio-political and interpersonal context, as well as within the medical and therapeutic apparatus of Speech-Language Pathologisation. A speech correction apparatus, SLP has historically operated by ‘scientifically’ standardising speech and diagnosing dysfluency as pathological (St. Pierre, “Governing the Voice” 160). Erupting SLP’s otherwise presumed objectivity, the conceptual paradigm of intervocality offers critical ways of interpreting and mobilising the stutter. In a similar vein, this paper demonstrates how, albeit arising out of fear, doubt, and restraint, the hesitation and tarrying of language within Gábor’s stammer become sites of discursive transformation.

Marc Shell, in his book *Stutter* (2005), notes how historically within SLP, the act of speaking ‘intelligibly’ has been considered to have the capacity to render a statement being spoken ‘true’ (Shell 31). The possession of an articulate speech accords one the power of truth-telling (St. Pierre, *Cheap Talk* 20). *Story of a Stammer* presents us with the operations of love, belief, history, event, and subjecthood that exist in

a complex relationship with truth and its telling. However, if truth is perceived as synonymous with the capacity for articulation, the stammer's failure to enunciate questions these very mechanisms that legitimise something as an event or truth. Beyond viewing dysfluency in terms of incapacity, silence, and surrender, this paper views it as potentially disrupting our normative understanding of agency in relation to intentionality and intelligibility. This also translates into Vida's failure to write *The Great Transylvanian Novel* which was the initially intended title and form of the text (Vida 24, italics in original). Instead of that novel, he presents us with an autofictional bildungsroman interspersed with gaps and repetitions. Within Nicolae Ceaușescu's regime, history was fictionalised or rewritten to connote a preferable account that exemplified the supremacy of the communist regime. Instead of merely preserving, this control of the archive produces and establishes documents, events, truth, and the law (Derrida 12). However, an archive has in it implicit forces that counter its claim of totality (Derrida 58). This paper contends that the *Story of a Stammer* becomes one such force that counters the fictionalising technologies operating in communist Romania (Behr 60).

The Stammering Subject: Personal and Political Resistance

In *Story of a Stammer*, Vida foregrounds multiple levels at which fiction-making and truth interact and are conflated with each other. Gábor's stutter exposes, demystifies, and subverts these very mechanisms at the personal and the socio-political level. Both these instances overlap and often co-occur. Gábor's introduction to Ceaușescu is immediately preceded by his childhood visits with his mother to Doctor Pamela, who diagnoses his speech disorder in terms of an "error" or "fault" (101). Failing to understand his stammer as an obstruction, Gábor only repeats what he is told:

I am careless, I'm trying to say things too quickly, I act in haste, I don't breathe properly, I don't think through what I want to say, my nerves are weak [...] It's my fault [...] I

distress my mother, like an unruly child, although there are none in our family. (101)

These medical visits are followed by visits to the Romanian museum where he first acquaints himself with Daco-Romanian relics and Ceaușescu's portrait. His emergence as a stammering subject in need of rehabilitation under SLP and his family's disciplining of his unruliness coincides with his education about the fictional history of the Daco-Romanian continuity. In these subsequent scenes, we observe the converging operations of knowledge and power at work in these three regimes of truth.

Firstly, Gábor's speech is scrutinised by the biopolitical apparatus of SLP that creates the pathological category of disability only to argue for its rehabilitation, ensuring individual well-being, productivity, and social integration (St. Pierre, "Governing the Voice" 151-156). While SLP's intention has been historically depoliticised, claiming to speak the "truth of the stuttering body," we must remember that "the 'problem' of dysfluency is [...] not really one of communication but of tenuous control over unruly bodies" (St. Pierre, "Governing the Voice" 175; St. Pierre, *Cheap Talk* 19). Its aim is to therapise an individual to speak in an accepted way, for what is fluent is no longer 'foreign.'

Concurrently, the reference to the Daco-Romanian relics in the museum that Gábor visits is a nod to one of Ceaușescu's technologies of "fictionalized myth-making" (Behr 60). Under the Romanian Party's regime and its "Marxism-Leninism, all truth was relative" (Behr 100). In "Representing an Ethnic Community in a Communist State," Tamás Lönhárt writes that in the mid-1970s, the official Transylvanian history commissioned for Ceaușescu countered the Hungarian history produced by the Hungarian Academy of Science's historians (69-70). Romanian museums were technologies of re-writing truth and history, assisting the charge of revisionism and Horthysm against Hungarian Transylvanians.² Such a historical account sanctioned by

2 "Horthysm" is a reference to the alleged allegiance of Transylvanian Hungarians to the early twentieth century fascist regime of Miklós Horthy in Hungary. Under the Romanian Communist regime, the Transylvanian Hungarians were scapegoated and often wrongfully accused of loyalty to Horthy and of harbouring revisionist Hungarian sentiments (Lönhárt 69).

Ceașescu argued for the continuity of the race of Dacians that existed in Transylvania before its Roman occupation, and even before the onset of Magyar (Hungarian) rule and its Székely population. The official script dictated that Transylvania belonged to the Romanians despite and perhaps because it was the centre of scrimmage between Hungary and Romania. This conflict continued across their various treaties and pacts during the interwar tussle between Germany and the Soviet Union as well as after the Second World War, during Transylvania's autonomisation and reversal under communist Romania (Behr 25-26). However, Ceașescu's claim of a Daco-Romanian purity is a fiction composed to displace both Hungarian bodies, and culture, and to bring about ethnic cleansing. Within this instrument of truth-making one fails to say or hear an alternate history that deviates from its dominant articulation. Otherwise, it stutters, is rendered 'unruly' and dysfluent, and needing 're-education.' In a way, the discovery of Gábor's stammer coincides with and perhaps even symbolises one of the first instances of awareness of the political regime which later morphs into a "collective fear that nobody could escape because [it] feeds on what we cannot openly tell one another" (Vida 372). Fear of the dominant regime grapples with doubts about its totalitarian discourse within Gábor's stammer.

While the stutter may be a symptom of Gábor's fear and a result of his submission in the first place, it also resists his assimilation to both the State's official historical account and SLP's insistence on normality. Interestingly, Gábor's stammer is also understood in the novel to have stemmed out of his constant fear of his family's indignation and censure. However, this vocal disruption is also often read as disobedience by his mother. Just like the state, Gábor's mother as well as her Baptist Székely father, Gyurika "act like an uncompromising censor" of behaviour, words, and memories, and insist on him learning Romanian (73). In grandfather Gyurika's house at Barót, even love becomes a matter of truth-telling. Here, there are

fights [that] aren't about possessions [...] but for the right to be loved, as that is an entitlement too, and one has to fight

for one's truth and leadership, as that is a position where from one can decree to others what their place is, what they are and aren't allowed to do, and what they should be talking about. (119)

In Gábor's family, being loved becomes a matter of being able to claim the authority to speak, and therefore, 'make' the fiction truth. To love someone, then, becomes synonymous with obeying, and fearing them. While Gábor's stammer symbolises the latter, in its refusal or inability to speak, it also undoes the truth and reveals the oppression as well as "the tension between the existing and the speakable" that plays out within this arena of love (135).

Within *Story of a Stammer*, the unspeakable surfaces as silence and non-verbal instances as well. There are many fissures in the 'fiction' of a uniform truth, positioned at and revealing the limits of voice and what can be vocalised. At Barót, the oppressive family ideology as well as the tyranny of the Romanian Securitate drives Uncle Tom to suicide. Uncle Will often explodes into bouts of anger. At Ágya, Gábor's paternal grandfather suffers from alcoholism and partakes in suicidal ideation. At Kisjenő, Gábor's mother suffers from psychosomatic gallbladder pains, and his father's fear of the ever-surveilling Securitate paralyses the right side of his face and hurls him into silence. Gábor's stammer is thus one of these minor gestures in which the unspeakable of the everyday violence of the dictatorship and the family ideology, and the unspeakability accorded simultaneously by the regime's censorship, uphold each other. It symbolises his subservience and his lack of belongingness. However, it also perforates the uniformity and linearity of the pre-given narratives. It deviates and engenders gaps, excesses, and foreignness in the tyrannical regimes of Ceaușescu's communist Romania, Gábor's family ideology, and the SLP apparatus.

Stuttering Narrative: Form and Its (Dis)content

Vida's novel chronicles a stammering story. In it, stuttering informs the novel's content and becomes a literary technique that both emerges out of and critically reflects back on its context and content, that is, the two antithetical and yet intertwined stammer(s): that of Ceaușescu and of Gábor. In *Kiss the Hand You Cannot Bite* (1992), Edward Behr talks about how Ceaușescu, too, stammered and took measures to control it. According to Behr, all the involuntary hesitations, pauses and stutters were edited out of Ceaușescu's speeches before they were broadcast (157). The truth that he 'composed' across and in the name of Romanian history and culture rested on the finality of his word. As Behr writes, "[Q]uoting Ceaușescu was a form of ritual mass" (153). All forces—minority languages and literature, ideologies, educational faculties, and archives—that failed to comply with and cite Ceaușescu's narrative were rendered non-existent. However, how does one quote words that stutter?

Ceaușescu's fabricated archive operates through the citation of his speech. It stutters just as his failure of speech becomes an impasse, obstructing the sovereignty of his word. Jacques Derrida in "Archive Fever," remarks that "anarchiving destruction belongs to the process of archivization" (59). The archive institutes and conserves memory and history based on the exclusion of certain subjects from it (12). However, the gaps present within the archive reveal its own mechanisms of the selective constitution of linear historical narratives. Similarly, Ceaușescu's stammer exposes these gaps or rather the fiction that is his truth. His fiction ranged from denying censorship in Transylvania to the liquidation of Hungarian culture in the name of modernisation (Vida 330). Under Ceaușescu's regime, even scientific truth stood falsified and altered (Lönhart 69-70). Interestingly, the frequency of Ceaușescu's stammer and slippages only increased as his regime approached its decline in 1989 (210). In his stammer, "[his] voice itself [becomes] the agency of its own blockage" (Connor 25). After all, one's stammer teeters beyond the speaker's intention. If during the communist regime, Ceaușescu's saying became his truth, I contend that his failed

suppression of his stammer reveals the constructed nature of his regime's 'truths,' and the fiction-making it sought to disguise.

In the novel, Ceaușescu's stammer is confronted and highlighted by Gábor's stammer which functions as an anarchive or counter-archive. In the vein of the minor, Deleuze talks of "creative stuttering" wherein the writer makes the language foreign (109-110). For Deleuze, in stuttering, a major language is uttered in a minor manner; it stands demystified. Gábor's stuttering Hungarian erupts the reigning Romanian narrative. It resists by originally writing about the events of a regime in a language that was prohibited by it (even though this paper refers to the English translation by Jozefina Komporalý). Vida refers to the operations of Ceaușescu's control, but in documenting them, he reveals and rebukes their constructed-ness, incoherence, and violence. Vida accomplishes this not just through rewriting Ceaușescu's narrative in his own prohibited language, but also through the larger dislinear and tentative movement of the novel.

It is interesting to note that Gábor does not stutter in Romanian or French, but only in Hungarian. This points towards discrepancies even in the Hungarian narratives passed down to him. Just like in Romania, the history of Hungary does not account for Hungarian Transylvanians (Vida 328). Moreover, while the Hungarians within Romania criticised Ceaușescu's dictatorship, they failed to condemn the dictatorship in Hungary. Even though Hungarian religions were inimical to the socialist regime, the church existed as "the depository of the concept of the nation [...] [involved in] the construction of socialism" (Vida 137). Additionally, despite the prevailing narrative of Romanian oppression of Hungarian minorities, "communist party secretaries and Securitate agents were actually of Hungarian ethnicity in Székely Land—they were more eager and often more cruel" (Vida 34). The truth spelled out by the Hungarians around Gábor remains garbled. Its insistence on silencing doubt becomes inseparable from Ceaușescu's truth-making schemes despite the essential dissonance between the two.

In addition to critically interpreting the solidity of Ceaușescu's regime, and making the dominant Hungarian discourse stutter, throughout the novel, the intention behind Vida's writing also stumbles.

What started as a novel about the origin of Transylvania through the origin of his familial roots remains tentative. He finds the past events that he wishes to base the novel on utterly ambiguous. It seems that the historical memory and truth of Hungarians in Romania have always been ‘fictional’ to some degree. Instead of actively fictionalising his past, Vida then resorts to writing a book about himself—his life. What results is a curious work of autofiction. He writes, “So I’ll pretend to tell everything as it was, as I can, as it’s easier to tell, although this will only end up like any other construction” (47). This ‘fictionalising’ functions beyond intent. It takes the place of the lack of events or truth of historical narrative.

The form of *Story of a Stammer* exhibits disnarration that coincides with the movement of a stutter. Stuttering is characterised by repetition, deferral, suspension, and cessation—all of which also operate in the constant unbecoming of Vida’s non-linear narrative. Just like stuttering, it also “enacts contrary impulses—the impulse to speak, and the impulse to withhold speech” (Connor 21). The tension between silence and speech congeals itself into a stammer wherein lies and truth contest in the operation of fiction. Vida writes, “Whatever we leave unsaid doesn’t exist. Only certain things can be discussed, and only in a clearly prescribed way, all else is forbidden” (124). The stammer—both of Gábor’s vocals and of the narrative—becomes a means of articulating that which is not meant to be articulated, regardless of its truth value. It becomes a practice of writing about things that would rather remain unspoken, and yet make up the ‘real,’ while also questioning this very realness.

Despite being a bildungsroman of sorts, we see an uncertain and disconcerted clattering of the narrative—its constant unbecoming. At times, Vida struggles with what he should write about and how. He is hesitant about how ‘real’ the content of his narrative is. His text builds upon a plurality of narratives disseminated to and interpreted by him. The first-person narrative voice insists on and affects the equivocality of the past as a historical account—it prefers to be called fiction. It is a fiction written in a minor key in so far as it fractures the official ‘fiction’ of the majoritarian state and its major language. In a Deleuzian

fashion, it makes the major fiction or ‘truth’ stutter, revealing beneath it the task of naturalisation of the dominant ideological discourses and the constructed authenticity of their archive.

Instead of viewing its incompleteness and non-linearity as a failed composition, the novel “coagulates time [and event] in unexpected and sometimes uncomfortable ways” just as stuttering does (St. Pierre, “Stuttering and Ableism” 293). Here, the bildungsroman begins and ends in the middle—both in *media res* as well as syntactically with the word “but.” As the novel closes, Gábor pronounces that instead of just pondering over the already unstable past, his writing and his role consists in dealing with the future (Vida 373). However, the narrative and its understanding of the future itself enacts his “theory of deferral” that espouses perseverance beyond the pointlessness of life in the hope of a revelation of any change, some value, or the real (316). This revelation and its expectation repeat beyond the possibility of any finality. Within the narrative, the past and the future, the real and the fictive clutter together in a stammering self—a self perpetually becoming and unbecoming.

Conclusion: Capacity within Precarity

In *Story of a Stammer*, the punishment for speaking the unspeakable or speaking in ‘wrong’ ways is to be declared disobedient, foreign, and consequently, non-existent, and outside speech and citizenship. Not speaking in the right way, such as stuttering, has been historically and medically considered alongside foreign accents; the presence of either makes the citizenship and the subjecthood of the speaker precarious (St. Pierre, “Governing the Voice” 156). However, it would be more constructive to envisage the presumed illegibility and othering of Gábor’s stammering as a failure of listening and a possibility of cultural resignification.

Gábor’s stammer cannot be reduced to silence even as it exists as an involuntary and debilitating condition, and as a basis as well as effect of his displacement. Vida writes, “Stammering isn’t a mere question of articulation or breathing for me [...] Yet I won’t fall silent, I say what I say, and it’s no longer me who’s talking or who falls silent, I don’t

know who I am” (36). Gábor’s stammer is capacious—the self insists on speaking despite or perhaps through the very mechanisms that threaten to exhaust it. St. Pierre in “Stuttering and Ableism” foregrounds the “intervocality” of stuttering (294). “Intervocality” insists that voice operates in interaction between a hearer and the speaker within the mechanisms of power (294). Stuttering, too, is an effect of the hearers’ prejudices in a socio-cultural context just as much as it is an expression in and effect of an individual’s speech (294). The stammer arises from and perforates the totalitarian narrative that threatens to silence and censor it by persistently speaking in prohibited and illegible speech. In speaking so, it creates alternate truths whose ‘correctness’ no longer depends on decipherability. Instead of simply implying the collapse of agency and volition, Gábor’s stammer speaks the truth while also making the truth stammer.

Vida’s stammering narrative marks a constant reorientation within disorientation. Its incompleteness makes the mythological naturalisation of speech, history, and politics hesitate. It becomes a minor way of being in a culture that disregards minority (ethnic, linguistic, vocal, and familial) lives and narratives. Although precarious, the stammer invents what Erin Manning in *The Minor Gesture* calls “new modes of perception [...] creat[ing] sites of dissonance, staging disturbances that open experience to new modes of expression” (1-2). Nicolae Ceaușescu’s stammer did not belong to himself. It obstructed his speech. It invited indignation and humiliation by others, signified the fragility of his ‘truth’ and ideology, and paralleled the uncertainty and the fall of his regime. Likewise, the stammer in Gábor’s story prompted his harassment and discipline, marking his foreignness. In both instances, the minor form of the stammering narrative and its (dis)contents collapses both speech and silence, fiction and history, in two very separate yet simultaneous ways. It is a minor gesture that muddles agency with helplessness, intention with passivity, and unspeakability with refusal.

Gábor Vida ends or rather defers *Story of a Stammer* with “[a]nd in case anybody wondered whether that was all, I could even say, yes. But” (374). Here, not only does ‘but’ evade any finality, but it is also not followed by silence. Instead, in it, we see the narrative stuttering,

opening itself up both against and beyond itself. It commands the reader to adopt a form of listening that accounts for ethical uncertainty. In Vida, stuttering performs narrative resistance against totalising dominant historical and ideological accounts. It renders the major language, narrative, and telling as minor. Stuttering thus becomes a form of critical negativity that does not end in negation, but instead points to newer mechanisms of aesthetic as well as political resistance that lie 'elsewhere.'

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Biography

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