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Dominik Zechner 

*Everyone senses that the work escapes, that it is something else than its
history [...].*

Roland Barthes, *On Racine*¹

There is something impossible about writing a first sentence. Any other sentence, even last sentences, have something to build on; they come from somewhere, are continuing something. Whatever precedes them already stipulates their direction. Even if they break off from what comes before, as the anacoluthon would, what's previously there fundamentally conditions the diversion's very possibility. Prior to the existence of a sentence there exists another sentence. But is this also true for first sentences? Where exactly do they come from? What prepares their occurrence? What do they have to work with? In what follows, I propose to interrogate the possibility of the first sentence with regard to the constitutive rift between literature, or language in general, on the one hand, and phenomenal reality on the other. My suggestion would be that first sentences have to negotiate this rift in complex ways, which is to say, they need to secure the integrity of their linguistic environment by somehow tearing away the possibility of a literary world from referential reality. First sentences interpolate reality and thus draw a boundary between words and experiential objects and events. I will be expounding this issue by drawing on a series of theoretical takes on the problem of reference and will be arranging these interrogations around a discussion of Don DeLillo's 2007 novel *Falling Man*, specifically its first sentence: 'It was not a street anymore but a world, a time and space of falling ash and near night'.²

As one of the few contemporary critics to have explicitly addressed the problem of the first sentence, Stanley Fish emphasises precisely their prospective quality: 'The category of the first sentence', he writes, 'makes sense only if it is looking forward'.³ We cannot speak of a first sentence if by the same token we do not already consider the probable actualisation of a second sentence, a third, and so on. Hence, the first sentence 'foreshadows', as Fish calls it, a multiplicity of subsequent, connected sentences.⁴ In this sense, first sentences are marked by a certain angle of inclination, 'they lean forward'.⁵ 'Even the simplest first sentence is on its toes, beckoning us to the next sentence and the next and the next, promising us insights, complications, crises, and sometimes, resolutions', Fish writes.⁶ Every first sentence thus implicitly utters a promise – it vouches

that it won't stand alone, there will be more, other, different sentences. Every first sentence calls forth a sentence to come.

For 'no sentence is an island and no sentence wants to be treated as one', as another contemporary critic puts it.⁷ This holds especially true for first sentences that carry the burden of remedying their solitude by ensuring the possibility of sentential succession. The imperative that Jean-François Lyotard formulated for *la phrase* – namely, 'il faut enchaîner' – thus carries a particular urgency with regard to firsts: 'It is necessary to link onto a phrase that happens (be it by a silence, which is a phrase), there is no possibility of not linking on to it', he explains in *The Differend*.⁸ Arguably, then, even a sentence that has failed to engender a second one may legitimately be called a 'first sentence' – for the mute aftermath of its failure to connect itself becomes readable if not as a spelled-out sentence then, at least, as a phrase fallen silent. What the first sentence does, therefore, is to conjure the necessity of enchainment, language's power of power of linkage. It invokes the imperative of communication in the most basic sense of a speaking-on – ensuring the possibility of a text that goes beyond its incipient confines and the confines of its incipit. Needless to say, the mode of such linkage is not arbitrary but subject to certain discursive and genre-specific requirements. If we talk about literary prose texts, these requirements may revolve around the possibilities of narrative progression. They ensure, to reiterate Lyotard's alarmed formulation, that potential 'damages inflicted upon the first phrase by the second' can be avoided.⁹

Everything we have stated thus far about the nature of first sentences may very well be true – the law of enchainment that structures the need of the first sentence to connect itself to other sentences; its circumspect anticipation of the rest of the narrative; its inherent promise of a second sentence, a third, and so on. Still, the question remains where exactly a first sentence *comes from* and how exactly it is possible. What conditions need to be in place for a first sentence to occur? How does one perform a first sentence? Is it even a question of performance? For all its power to link itself to other, subsequent sentences, the first sentence does not connect itself to anything already given within the text. If we assume a scene of writing unsure even of the title of the text about to be written, we can provisionally exclude from the possibility of the first sentence any kind of manifest paratexts – titles, chapter headings, epigraphs, dedications, and so on – whose pre-given presence would somehow shape the possibility of the first sentence. The occurrence of a first sentence must be imagined as taking place in the void of the empty page; its manifestation is always connected to the madness of *tabula rasa*. First sentences are mad about their power to institute. If the first sentence carries (and 'carries out' – Fish explicitly speaks of first sentences as 'pregnant' with other sentences) the possibility of 'enchainment' and thus of narrative, it can, however, never itself become manifest as an effect of this very possibility. It's therefore possible to argue that the first sentence, and each first sentence anew, must invent its ability to link and relay, to anticipate a follow-up sentence. As soon as there's a sentence, it wants to link itself to other sentences. But why are there sentences in the first place?

In a perhaps counter-intuitive sense, a first sentence can be said to be entirely subject to the phatic function of speech. For Roman Jakobson, the 'phatic' belongs to the six functions of language, and he defines it as 'serving to establish, to prolong, or to discontinue communication'.¹⁰ To be sure, the possibility of first sentences might have been the last thing on his mind when Jakobson developed this definition; what he primarily thinks of are moments in speech that make sure a speaker has their interlocutors' attention as in the question 'are you listening?'.¹¹ In a sense, one could say the 'phatic function' of language first of all establishes the possibility of something we can call 'communication'. It makes me say something in order to make sure that I can say something. When someone calls you and you pick up the phone with a 'Hello?', this utterance does not so much serve as a greeting as it functions to establish the communication channel's integrity. 'Hello?' 'Are you there?' – such questions are meant to ensure that the speech about to happen can actually happen.¹² The phatic function of language asks: 'Are we in contact? Is there contact between us? Are we in touch?' The American idiom 'let's stay in touch' is a basic enactment of the phatic function of language. 'Let's stay in touch' means as much as 'let's make sure that communication between us remains possible'; 'let's make sure that this conversation continues on', and so forth.

If Stanley Fish is correct and the first sentence is by nature geared toward continuity, it needs, prior to any determination of its content, to be understood as an operator of the phatic. What first sentences do, more so than any other type of sentence, is to make sure the anticipation of other sentences is appropriate, the narrative may continue, there is progress. Before a first sentence says anything, it promises us that sentences are, in principle, possible – that there can be such a thing as a first sentence, that the narrative about to happen can indeed happen, hence other sentences are possible and will follow, *promise*.¹³ First sentences are emphatically phatic in that they carry out the promise of communication. This holds true even if they do not contain any explicit phatic expressions (texts whose first sentences address the reader directly, getting a hold of their addressee and arresting their attention, are indeed possible and even numerous – but they do not constitute a reliable norm). What is undeniable is not the phatic expression as such but the implicit phatic character of all opening phrases: they must ensure that the narrative they herald is, in fact, tellable. They work to establish its tellability and in doing so they open themselves up to 'enchainment', the promise and anticipation of subsequent sentences, and perhaps even a last sentence.

Assigning the most basic phatic function of language to first sentences still does not entirely clear up the mystery of their occurrence, however. First sentences, it has been said, take place as and in the *horror vacui* of the empty first page. But that does not mean that absolutely nothing precedes them. On the contrary, a sentence necessarily occurs in the opening of its language. Even before it says anything concrete, the first sentence signals *that there is language* – language needed to form a sentence. The imperative of linkage to which the first sentence adheres, and which allows it to proliferate into multiple

subsequent sentences, takes place within the openness of language without which this first sentence would not be able to unfold. The possibility of the sentence is conditioned by the being of language. Insisting that in order for sentences to occur there first must exist a language in which to write these sentences does more than simply stating the obvious. For it reminds us of the fact that sentences occur in the medium of their language, and that they are thus linguistic entities rather than, say, things in the world. This basic truth about the nature of the sentence might help us understand what exactly occurs as a first sentence comes into existence. I would like to suggest that prior to all its power to engender and link up, the first sentence performs a cut. It performs an incision and draws a border – one that runs between the world of phenomena on the one hand, and linguistic reality on the other.

Consider an example. If we approach a contemporary novel such as DeLillo's *Falling Man*, published in 2007, it would be tempting to call this text 'historical' in the sense that it seems to be firmly grounded in the referential reality of one of the most decisive events of recent history: 9/11. At its core, we find Keith Neudecker, a lawyer who works in the World Trade Center and who manages, on the day of the catastrophe, to escape from the damaged building only slightly injured. The novel's opening chapter tells of Neudecker's escape, setting in shortly after the attack has taken place. Based on this brief account of the novel's opening, one could argue that rather than performing a cut, DeLillo's text seems to offer a seamless continuation between historical reality and literary fiction – as the narrative commences right after the calamitous event has taken place, unfolding its story as a fictional repercussion ensuing from the world-historical shock. In an important sense then, what's at stake here is the relationship between words and phenomenal events, or, conceptually, between philology and history.

In an essay from 2009, Thomas Schestag explores this relationship, albeit not with regard to DeLillo but Walter Benjamin. Schestag pays attention to Benjamin's provisional definition of philology as 'being close to history from the side of the chronicle', which he defines as 'interpolated history'.¹⁴ Schestag proceeds to unfold this definition and suggests that 'chronicles result from interventions in (historical) occurrences from which this or that date, this or that name are retrieved and registered'.¹⁵ While this process may take place with the stated intention of creating a smooth continuum between history and its interpolated, registered, verbalised form in the chronicle, Schestag insists that it does not manifest without violence and without ruptures: the intention 'to bring the content of history to language exposes discontinuous traits in the image of the chronicle, of counting and recounting. The gesture of interpolation oscillates between the filling and the tearing of holes: if, through the insertion of a detail, it fills a gap, it also opens (at least) two new ones'.¹⁶ This is to say that history, to the extent that we are able to verbalise it, can only come to language at the cost of a constitutive rupture and discontinuity. By insisting that every time we interpolate to close a hole, we inevitably tear at least two new ones, Schestag makes obvious that the

trade-off is uneven: the more we speak, the more names and dates we interpolate, the more historical events come to language, the more intense the cut, the more manifold the ruptures, the more disastrously irreconcilable the caesura that lodges itself between history and its language.

With this in mind, I invite the reader to consider the opening line of DeLillo's novel. The sentence reads: 'It was not a street anymore but a world, a time and space of falling ash and near night'.¹⁷ If I said above that the first sentence, in addition to its power of linkage, must also apply a cut, in DeLillo's case this cut takes on the form of a 'not'. Instead of signalling a referential continuum between phenomenon and language, the novel tells us that something is *not* or *no longer*, *not anymore*. At first glance, of course, this negation refers to the catastrophic event: something has taken place, in historical reality, that had the transformative power of turning skyscrapers into ashes and a street into its 'not anymore'. Yet I would like to suggest that beyond this report on the event, the sentence expresses something like a linguistic or literary truth about itself as a sentence. More than that, it makes something explicit which in many other narrative openings only occurs as an unstated operation: namely a detachment from referential reality for the sake of the establishment of a linguistic 'world'. In DeLillo's case this detachment from the referent is expressed with the words 'it was not a street anymore'. If not a street, then what? 'A world'. A world conditioned by its own time and space, characterised by nothing but 'falling ash and near night'. It's a world at dusk in which we lose track of the contours of the referent as the ashes of its language cloud our insight.

That something like a philological truth finds expression in this sentence is corroborated if we turn, for a moment, to Werner Hamacher's '95 Theses on Philology'. This late work that introduces, among other things, the idea of a 'philological affect', includes the following proposition: '*Was geschieht, ist Abschied*'. It appears as 'Thesis 34' and is translated as, 'What happens is parting'.¹⁸ The term '*Geschehen*' in German is notoriously hard to translate; Hamacher preferred it over the term 'Ereignis', which he viewed with suspicion due to its semantic proximity to the complex of *Eigenheit* (properness), *Eigentum* (property), and *Eigentlichkeit* (authenticity). 'Geschehen' would be an event beyond the proper, perhaps best translated as 'occurrence'. The term '*Abschied*', on the other hand, might more intuitively be rendered as 'departure', so that the proposition reads: *what occurs is departure*. What might, at first, sound like a needlessly hermetic, enigmatic formulation, becomes more tangible if we consider its provenance – for the phrase is directly lifted from a 1985 essay titled, '*Über einige Unterschiede zwischen der Geschichte literarischer und der Geschichte phänomenaler Ereignisse*'.

The essay critiques the Hegelian presumption of an essential unity between historical deed and its presentation in narrative that amounts to a basic symmetry between the historical event and its comprehension. According to Hegel, Hamacher tells us, historical cognition is the self-recognition of the historical subject in its own deeds: the subject as the author of his own history

finds himself represented in historical narrative.¹⁹ In order to demonstrate the inherent contradictions of this view, Hamacher turns away from Hegel and toward Homer to discuss a moment in the *Odyssey*. The scene has Odysseus listen to a song reflecting his own deeds in the battle of Troy.²⁰ In the Hegelian sense, Odysseus should be able to recognise himself in the song's narrative and thus assert his authorship over the historical events for which he was responsible and which he now finds represented in song. In Homer, however, the opposite happens. The hero breaks down crying, though not out of grief over the reported experiences, but because he appears estranged from the subject behind those historical deeds:

Odysseus weeps over the loss of his own story, which is no longer in his power, but rather has become an autonomous epic, one made foreign, torn from him [...]. Odysseus does not experience the narrative of his subjective experience, and he does not take in the encounter with his past as the reappropriation and internalization of his life, disposed of in the epic [...] but as a hostile attack upon that part of his own person that was meant to ensure the economy of his life and lineage. The narration of history is the robbery of the life of the one to whom it has occurred. What occurs in the narration of history is the departure from history as it is experienced.²¹

A few lines further down, Hamacher ultimately condenses this argument into the phrase: 'What occurs is departure', the very sentence that will reappear 35 years later as 'Theses 34' in his writings on philology²². It thus becomes clearer what is behind the terms 'Geschehen' and 'Abschied': what occurs, in Homer, is primarily *not* the historical event but its narration – Benjamin may have said its 'interpolation', in the most basic sense: its becoming-language. What transpires when language interpolates history is – according to Homer, according to Hamacher – a hostile attack upon the idea of subjective experience as the cognitive host of historical understanding. If the narration of history entails its subsequent and irretrievable 'loss', that is so because interpolated history is no longer subject to any kind of subjective command; Hamacher states that it has become 'autonomous'. This autonomy moves the historical incident from the realm of subjective experience to that of linguistic reality: it is now a literary occurrence rather than a phenomenal event. And the fragile tie of reference that connects the two turns out to be too frail to assert the authority of phenomenal reality and subjective experience in any convincing way. Telling a particular history, therefore, does not mean to confirm the experience of the one who once carried out this history or participated in it; it means to expropriate this history from the life of the subject whose deeds contributed to its coming-about. Which is to say that narration performs an irreconcilable rift between life and its interpolated history. This history, that you are telling me, is no longer yours – *it's not a life anymore but a story...*

In the case of DeLillo's first sentence, the interpolating cut gives way to a certain kind of worlding. If the 'not anymore' of 'it was not a street anymore'

negates the referent and thus the sentence's anchoring in phenomenal reality, the commencing narrative does not merely dwell in a space of pure negativity and loss. Instead, the negation of the referent gives rise to an entire world: 'a world, a time and space of falling ash and near night'. In a sense, this world is what remains after narration has executed its 'robbery', to echo Hamacher's argument. It's the world of the 'autonomous epic', one that no longer adheres to the parameters of historical lived experience but one that is constituted primarily as a linguistic or literary event. '[L]anguage', Wilhelm von Humboldt once wrote, 'is not merely a medium of exchange for mutual comprehension, but a true *world* [...]'.²³ The proposition appears in his text *The Diversity of Human Language-Structure and its Influence on the Mental Development of Mankind*, published in 1836. And even though it goes on to state, in the manner of 19th-century idealism, that this world is the world of spirit whose prerogative it is to posit it between itself and its objects, the enunciation of a proper linguistic world and worldhood deserves our attention. According to Humboldt's claim, language may be used as a means of exchange *in the world*, yet beyond such usage it opens up *its own true world*. If DeLillo's novel opens with the phrase 'it was not a street anymore but a world', an intra-linguistic reading will conclude that the world in question is precisely the 'true world' of linguistic being.²⁴ In a sense, then, all this sentence states is that it is (not a street anymore but) a sentence. My suspicion would be that while DeLillo makes this process – of violent interpolation and the rejection of the referent – explicit, something akin to this movement might be at play in any literary opening line. A literary opening always functions as the line of demarcation where one world ends and another begins. In other words, it traces the border between phenomena and language, beings and linguistic occurrences – and bears testimony to their irreconcilability. Each first sentence carries, and carries out, a *not* that cuts away everything that does not belong to the 'true world' at whose threshold we stand at the beginning of a text.²⁵ Every first sentence assures us that something is no more; whatever we thought was there no longer exists. Every first sentence declares the 'no longer' of that which lies beyond its own true world.

Even if something like a general narrative truth might be at stake here, it behoves us to take a closer look at the singular, and singularly peculiar, rhetoric of DeLillo's sentence. What seems to be particularly troubling when a novel starts with the phrase, 'It was not a street anymore but a world', is the fact that the sentence engages in a certain narrative convention while at the same time abnegating it. For the opening formulation 'it was' certainly inscribes the line in a wider tradition of modern story-telling. Consider for instance the famous opening line of Kafka's 'The Judgment': 'It was on a Sunday morning, when spring was at its best' ('Es war an einem Sonntagvormittag im schönsten Frühling').²⁶ The German phrase 'es war' invokes the boilerplate fairy tale opening of 'es war einmal ...' ('once upon a time, there was ...'). Yet, if we put Kafka's sentence next to DeLillo's, we quickly realize that their narrative directionalities do not coincide, which becomes obvious once we put some pressure on the pronoun 'it' with which both texts commence.

A first, and rather obvious, observation would be that ‘it’ is an odd choice for a first word since it cannot function on its own; by dint of being a pronoun it serves as a stand-in for the actual word which the use of ‘it’ in this position withholds from us. In a sense then, ‘it’, even if it appears to be the first word, cannot be the first word. It’s the word that stands in for another word, hence it is technically always already the text’s second word. The word ‘it’ is a linguistic palimpsest through which other words are implicitly invoked – and it thus signals the worlding of language of which Humboldt speaks as the word ‘it’ alone already harbours a network of relations that are entirely intra-linguistic. At the same time, however, the word ‘it’ immediately touches upon the problem of referentiality since pronouns by definition refer to something absent. And it’s their way of referring that distinguishes DeLillo’s line from Kafka’s. While the ‘it’ of ‘it was on a Sunday morning’ more clearly refers forward into the story about to be told and to the literary event related therein, DeLillo’s ‘it’ seems to maintain a residual attachment to the lost phenomenal reality from which the narrative cuts itself away. If something is ‘not anymore’ an object but something else, this negativity refers to an anterior state whose lingering presence can be sensed through the placement of the pronoun ‘it’. In other words, while Kafka’s ‘es war’ has a proleptic function, reaching forward into the unfolding narrative, DeLillo’s ‘it was’ is regressive, grappling with the loss of an anterior reality.²⁷ What this indicates is that despite all the negative verve of its ‘departure’ from history, it remains questionable whether DeLillo’s interpolation will have been successful, which is to say, whether it actually leaves the phenomenal referent behind for the sake of its literary world. While the phrase ‘not anymore’ performs the interpolating cut, the pronoun ‘it’ stands as the last remaining phenomenal holdout, a vanishing monument to a pre-linguistic reality from which the novel’s first sentence so decidedly seeks to depart. The question therefore arises as to whether the ‘true world’ of literature can even tolerate something like a referent.

The very last entry in Paul de Man’s teaching notebooks, dated Fall 1983, states the following: ‘la fonction référentielle est un piège, mais inévitable’ (‘the referential function is a trap, albeit an inevitable one’).²⁸ What he may have meant with this formulation becomes clearer if we take a look at a moment in the *Rhetoric of Romanticism*. At stake is the problem of autobiography, a specific mode, if you will, of historically embedded writing. De Man starts by rehearsing a common misconception: ‘Autobiography’, he says, ‘seems to depend on actual and potentially verifiable events in a less ambivalent way than fiction does. It seems to belong to a simpler mode of referentiality, of representation, and of diegesis’.²⁹ What apparently guarantees this ‘simpler mode of referentiality’ is a seemingly uncomplicated reliance on ‘a single subject whose identity is defined by the uncontested readability of his proper name’.³⁰ This logic of identity in the name may be expanded from the realm of autobiography to questions of historical referentiality as such: for even though DeLillo does not deliver an autobiographical text in the concrete sense, the event that apparently grounds the novel indeed carries a proper name: ‘9/11’. And so does the historical-phenomenal referent that locates (and is dislodged by) this event: ‘World Trade Center’.

Part of the problem of DeLillo's novel, however, is that the term 'world' in 'World Trade Center' and the 'true world' opened up by his first sentence do not coincide. And not only does the narrated event entail the physical destruction of its referent – the operation of narration itself requires a kind of referential departure ('Abschied'), so that DeLillo's opening negotiates a double loss that combines historical calamity with the impossibility of telling about it without undermining the structure of historical reference. Narration, as in Homer's case, leaves the referent behind.³¹ The structure of reference, therefore, turns out to be less 'simple' than initially seems to be the case: 'does the referent', asks de Man, 'determine the figure, or is it the other way round: is the illusion of reference not a correlation of the structure of the figure, [...] *no longer* clearly and simply a referent at all but something more akin to a fiction which then, [...] in its own turn, acquires a degree of referential productivity'.³² The relationship between literary language and the object of its representation, what de Man calls 'figure' and 'referent', is therefore turned upside down: reference turns out to be an illusion grounded in the structure of figurative language, a fiction able to release its own effects of referentiality. In other words: narrative is not (and never) the product of language's referential function, but whatever effects of reference we may detect in a given text are themselves a function of narrative.

If this is the case, it must, however, also hold true for the ambivalent 'it' with which DeLillo's sentence begins: the phenomenal residue to which it regressively seems to seek to hold on is but a referential effect of the commencing narrative, rather than the unshakable phenomenal ground upon which the narrative scaffold is placed. The departure from the phenomenal referent opens the space for the constitution of the referent as linguistic fiction – a fiction, however, that is just as true as the narrative's 'true world'. Notice in particular de Man's suggestion that there is '*no longer* clearly and simply a referent [emphasis added]', and the way it corresponds to DeLillo's phrase, 'it was *not* a street *anymore* [emphasis added]'. If we make explicit what DeLillo's sentence rhetorically carries out, it would have to read: *it was not a referent anymore but the fiction of referentiality grounded in the structure of the figure*. Every first sentence on some level declares this 'not – anymore', this 'no longer', thus radically unmooring its presumed fixed anchoredness in the firm grounds of phenomenal reality, in order to unfold a 'true world' that would serve as its own singular frame of reference.³³

DeLillo's sentence continues by characterising its world as a 'time and space of falling ash and near night'. This subordinate clause becomes readable as anticipating the language of the novel falling into place as we read on. Before the word 'ash' can signify anything, it signifies the ashes of its own language. 'But the urn of language', Jacques Derrida writes at one point, 'is so fragile. It crumbles and immediately you blow into the dust of words which are the cinder itself'.³⁴ – 'Philology burns', Hamacher replies, years later, commenting on René Char's poem, 'The Library is on Fire': 'Language and everything coming in contact with it burns and this is no metaphor'.³⁵ To

read DeLillo non-metaphorically, as Hamacher demands, does not necessarily entail the reinstatement of the authority of the referent, reading the ‘falling of ash’ in question as a phenomenal event. Reading literally principally means reading for the language. Which is to say that before the referential function of language can start operating, the ‘falling ash’ of which the first sentence reports effectively characterises the possibility of the sentence itself: the words fall like ash in this odd space and time that designate the novel’s true world.

Notes

¹ Barthes, *On Racine*, 155.

² DeLillo, *Falling Man*, 3.

³ Fish, *How to Write a Sentence*, 99.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., 100.

⁷ Mieszkowski, *Crises of the Sentence*, 13.

⁸ Lyotard, *The Differend*, 29.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Jakobson, “Linguistics and Poetics,” 355.

¹¹ In the age of Zoom and the Zoom conference, more appropriate examples might be ‘can you hear me?’, ‘can you see me?’, ‘I think I’m lagging’, ‘You’re muted!’, and so on.

¹² Discussing his friendship with Emmanuel Levinas, Jacques Derrida tells the following anecdote: ‘I cannot speak of the interruption without recalling, like many among you no doubt, the anxiety of interruption that I could feel in Emmanuel Levinas when, on the telephone for example, he seemed at each moment to fear being cut off, to fear the silence or disappearance, the “without-response”, of the other whom he tried to call out to and hold on to with an “allo, allo” between each sentence, and sometimes even midsentence’. Derrida, “Adieu,” 7. Levinas’ anxious *allo* does not serve any communicative purpose other than to ensure the possibility of communication itself. His example exposes the pervasive volatility of communicative processes. For it does not suffice to establish communicability once and proceed from there – the communicative thread connecting two subjects remains hopelessly fragile, such that Levinas must regress back into the phatic even mid-sentence: *allo, allo? Are you still there?* What Derrida here calls ‘anxiety of interruption’ belongs to the pathologies of the phatic and thus of first sentences.

¹³ There seems to be an inherent affinity between the phatic function of language and the speech act of the promise conceived as a fundamental linguistic occurrence: engaging

in the phatic function of speech means as much as to believe the promise that language is possible, that we can continue to speak, listen to one another, etc. The volatility of all communication owes itself to its promissory structure. We never actually speak – speaking means to promise that speaking is possible.

¹⁴ ‘[...] daß Philologie der Geschichte von Seiten der Chronik nahe steht. Die Chronik ist die grundsätzlich interpolierte Geschichte’, Benjamin, *Gesammelte Briefe II*, 137; my translation.

¹⁵ Schestag, “Interpolationen,” 51; my translation.

¹⁶ Ibid.; my translation.

¹⁷ DeLillo, *Falling Man*, 3.

¹⁸ Hamacher, “95 Theses,” xxv.

¹⁹ See Hamacher, “Über einige Unterschiede,” 163–167.

²⁰ Homer, *The Odyssey*, 297 (VIII: 521–549).

²¹ Hamacher, “On Some Differences,” 33; translation modified.

²² Ibid.; translation modified.

²³ Humboldt, *On Language*, 157. My reflection on this moment in Humboldt is guided by Martin Heidegger’s commentary in “The Way to Language,” 404.

²⁴ As far as Don DeLillo is concerned, his interest in the novel’s ‘worlding’ is not reducible to the first sentence of *Falling Man*. On the contrary, the idea that the function of a first sentence or a literary opening has to do with the creation of a world is suggested in various ways throughout DeLillo’s oeuvre. Consider his novel *The Body Artist* and its two opening lines: ‘Time seems to pass. The world happens, unrolling into moments, and you stop to glance at a spider pressed to its web’ (9); or the more recent *Zero K: ‘Everybody wants to own the end of the world’* (3). Once again, the worldhood proffered by the novel is determined by its own time and space, albeit a time that does not merely progress but only *seems* to pass, and a space that’s marked by the caesura of a halt performed

to observe something mundane. With *Zero K*, it becomes obvious that the novel is tasked not only with the initial bringing-about of a 'true world' but also with its un-worlding, raising the question that runs parallel to the one explored in this special issue, namely: how is it possible to end a narrative? The problem of *last* sentences deserves its own discussion, complementary to the one entertained here; for now, it must suffice to point out that the 'worlding' instigated by a first sentence ontologically implies the world's eventual un-speaking. The initiation of every world anticipates the end of the world.

²⁵ In his essay, "The Relation," Hamacher interrogates the structure of *not* and finds in it a fundamental trait of the nature of language: 'Before any no-saying, in the sense of a negation through an act of positing, there must have been a "not", that as an *address*, must have already directed itself to a possible speech, if this speech is to be able to address not only an existing "something" but precisely the "not" – and especially the "not" in its happening as *annulment*' (34). Hamacher here addresses precisely the rift between a referential and representational understanding of language (one according to which language would address itself to an *existing something*), and a more radically intra-linguistic understanding according to which language also always un-speaks that which exists, engaging in a kind of *annulment* that does not operate as a function of referentiality or representation. DeLillo's 'not anymore' must be read precisely as

carrying out the tension between these two dimensions of linguisticity and literariness. I would like to thank Serena Lückhoff for many fruitful conversations about Hamacher's essay.

²⁶ Kafka, "Judgment," 19.

²⁷ I would like to thank Zachary Sng for tough questions and important comments on this aspect of my argument.

²⁸ de Man, *Aesthetic Ideology*, 1.

²⁹ de Man, "Autobiography as De-Facement," 68.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ That the departure from the referent does not need to happen with the sombre seriousness staged in DeLillo, becomes clear if we turn to Goethe's *Werther*. Its famous first sentence – '[w]ie froh bin ich, daß ich weg bin!' ('how happy I am to be gone!') – testifies to the kind of linguistic gaiety that can come with abandoning the phenomenon for the sake for the word.

³² *Ibid.*, 69; my emphasis.

³³ In her recent study on 'pseudo-memoirs', Rochelle Tobias distinguishes between 'the referential dimensions of a work' and 'the way the world of reference is constructed' (24). This latter problem is precisely the concern of the first sentence: as it departs from the referent as historically grounded phenomenon in order to re-produce it as the effect of an intra-linguistic world-making. That Tobias, too, so prominently makes use of the term 'world' is no coincidence.

³⁴ Derrida, *Cinders*, 53.

³⁵ Hamacher, "For – Philology," 136.

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