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## Coming to (Language): Introduction

Kristina Mendicino and Dominik Zechner

In the spring semester of 1988, German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk was invited to deliver the famous *Frankfurter Poetikvorlesungen* (Frankfurt lectures in poetics) at the Johann Wolfgang Goethe University in Frankfurt am Main. The topic he chose to explore in the course of the five lectures was that of beginnings: ‘*Zur Welt kommen – Zur Sprache kommen*’ [coming to the world – coming to language]. The title of the series opens an interesting perspective on the problem of commencement – as it suggests that before we can arrive in order to ‘start something’, there must be a pre-existing context that is going to host our arrival. Otherwise put, we are never the ones ‘starting’ the world – on the contrary, whatever project we might wish to begin, it begins within a context that had already begun and whose beginning was not contingent upon our arrival. Which is to say that whatever beginning is possible is only possible to the extent that something had already begun, that a beginning had been made in the course of which the very field had been opened up within which thenceforth the making of beginnings was possible. Our beginning is feasible only because it transpires in the context of a world within which beginning is, in principle, possible, but whose own beginning is not conditional upon us, our arrival, nor our beginning. If the world is the context that allows for the gesture of beginning, this gesture itself is incapable of inaugurating the world. After all, we are mortals – not world-making divinities; and our beginnings are thus never absolute but derivative and secondary, inscribed within the field of possible beginnings whose own beginning must elude us. The first phrase of Sloterdijk’s title – ‘zur Welt kommen’ – therefore already signals a rift between beginning and beginning: as though a commencement were never just one but multiple. And once the possibility of beginning was begun, a dissemination of beginnings would occur that rendered a conceptual unity of all beginning unthinkable.

If the act of *coming to (world)* already implies the necessary multitude of all beginning, one wonders why Sloterdijk nonetheless felt the need of doubling his title. ‘*Zur Welt kommen – Zur Sprache kommen*’ allows for at least two readings, one that would draw the two phrases together, and one that would radically oppose them. In other words, one could read ‘coming to language’ as the mere supplement, a kind of translation, of the first phrase, such that ‘coming to world’ were another way of saying ‘coming to language’, namely to the extent that the context called ‘world’ would itself be linguistic in nature – and to arrive at this world, to begin something in this world, necessarily would coincide with acquiring its language. When Martin Heidegger, in *Being and Time*, isolates what he calls ‘states of mind’ [*Befindlichkeit*] and

‘understanding’ [*Verstehen*] as the ‘fundamental *existentialia* which constitute [...] the disclosedness of Being-in-the-world’, he suggests that coming to world and coming to language must always coincide since ‘discourse’ (*Rede*) is equiprimordial with both *Befindlichkeit* and *Verstehen*.<sup>1</sup> In other words, there is no experience of coming to world, of arrival in the world, that would not at the same time reflect a linguistic structure, since it is in language that our state of mind – and our understanding thereof – find expression. As a matter of fact, language is so fundamental to our Being-in-the-world that our analysis of worldhood tends to forget to make its linguistic structure explicit while at the same time essentially relying on it. Language, says Heidegger, is a phenomenon ‘of which we have been making constant use already in our foregoing Interpretation of state-of-mind, understanding, interpretation, and assertion; but we have, as it were, kept it suppressed’.<sup>2</sup> Even the analytic suppression of language has the character of language. And there is no way, neither of analysing the structure of Being-in-the-world, nor of literally inhabiting the world, that would not already rely on its linguistic nature.

The other reading motivated by Sloterdijk’s title departs from this Heideggerian paradigm. ‘Coming to world – coming to language’ would thus not posit two phrases conformingly corresponding to one another, but instead open a chasm between world and language, such that my arrival in the world could not coincide with my arrival in language. This reading would oppose a languageless world to a worldless language, confronting the one who arrives with the difficult task of reconciling the two. As we read on, Sloterdijk makes clear that it is this second reading to which he is most sympathetic. And even if he decidedly inhabits a Heideggerian lexicon, his departure from Heidegger could not be more staggering when he maintains ‘that for humans, as finite speaking beings, the beginning of Being and the beginning of language can under no circumstance coincide. For when language commences, Being is already here; and when one wants to begin with Being, one descends into the black hole of languagelessness [daß für Menschen, als endliche sprechende Wesen, der Seinsanfang und der Sprachanfang unter keinen Umständen zusammenfallen. Denn fängt die Sprache an, so ist das Sein schon da; will man mit dem Sein beginnen, versinkt man im schwarzen Loch der Sprachlosigkeit]’.<sup>3</sup> Even if, for the moment, we forego the odd notion of ‘wanting to begin with Being’ – as though there were a human agent capable of such a will, as though Being itself could be subject to our wanting in this simplified manner – Sloterdijk’s deliberation is utterly troubling as it conceives the origin of Being opening up entirely abandoned by language, *im schwarzen Loch der Sprachlosigkeit*. It is in this vacuum of language that Being, and by extension existence – including *our own* existence – is thought to be possible. Language would thus be nothing other than a belated supplement to our essence – forged in the darkness of a transcendental aphasia.

A few pages later, Sloterdijk expands on this thought by drawing a dividing line between the elements of speech and the human psyche: ‘Before words

and sentences approach, psyche drifts amid a colored, fluid sensing [...] that traces the neighborhood of things [Bevor Wörter und Sätze aufziehen, drifftet die Psyche in einem farbigen flüssigen Spüren, das (...) der Nachbarschaft der Dinge auf die Spur kommt].<sup>4</sup> Even if we grant the possibility of such a pure sensuality adrift, Sloterdijk's insistence on the term 'Spur [trace]' at the end of the sentence betrays the inscriptive nature even of this most basic sense-certainty. So that its colored liquid nature finds its counterpart in the petrified inscriptions that mark the 'neighborhood of things' whose encounter has the character of reading traces. This act of *tracing* discloses the linguistic nature of even the most primal, primitive existence to the degree that the relationship between sensuality and thingliness is one of apprehending inscriptions. A few lines prior, Sloterdijk can be observed to perform a similar operation, when the earliest events of our lives are said to 'carry the tattoos of birth and of speechless childhood nights [tragen die Tätowierungen der Geburt und der sprachlosen Kindertage]'.<sup>5</sup> The formulation once again suggests a beginning devoid of language – but this void can only be thought as entirely linguistic in nature, namely to the extent that the 'speechlessness' that ensconces our earliest days takes the form of 'tattoos' that quite literally imprint our being. The 'black hole of languagelessness' Sloterdijk conjures in his lectures thus has the structure of traces, imprints, inscriptions, writing – in short, it has the structure of language. There is no unstructured plasma of the world to which we could sensually be exposed without already turning it into a context of what Heidegger calls 'an intelligibility which goes with a state-of-mind [befindliche Verständlichkeit]' – an intelligibility that can only be accessed to the degree that it is linguistically cast.<sup>6</sup>

It has hopefully become obvious in the course of our analysis that our understanding of beginnings, precisely inasmuch as these beginnings are occurrences of language, does not concur with Sloterdijk's position. There is no beginning, we maintain, that could keep up with or even forego the commencement of language whose world-opening power allows for the possibility of all acts of beginning. 'In the beginning' – 'bereshit' – 'en arché' – 'im Anfang' – 'en tête' –: each word of commencement thus already comes too late for the beginning that it would designate and thereby catch up with, always already in the midst of the start *ab initio*. Should these opening words be any indication, any incipit to speak of speaks itself of and as its incapacity to initiate, out and away from [*ab*] the beginning [*initio*] that will have begun to withdraw before us. Even when theological announcements of a word 'in the beginning' affirm an *arché*, at least in principle, words open in a manner that places the notion of an *arché* in question and exposes the an-archic character of speaking. As Werner Hamacher has argued in a late essay on philology, the 'occurrence' of language 'first allows something to show itself as something at all'; hence, language cannot 'be traced back to any *arché* or *causa* that could ensure its proper constancy as *entelêcheia* or as a *causa sui*'.<sup>7</sup> The explicitness with which these premises for speaking are addressed in speaking, however, may vary from utterances that insist upon a prior 'beginning of Being' to texts such as the fragment from Friedrich Hölderlin's

*Homburger Folioheft* that Hamacher comments upon in his essay: 'Vom Abgrund nemlich haben/Wir angefangen [From the abyss namely/we have begun]'.<sup>8</sup>

On these lines, Hamacher remarks: 'The "a priori" – the "from the beginning" – is thus interpreted as "from the abyss" [*vom Abgrund*]. In itself unfirm, the a priori of beginning – this an-archic *archè* – can, however, be interpreted only as the occurrence of differentiation before every differentiated being'.<sup>9</sup> To this commentary one might add that the formulation for said occurrence in Hölderlin's verses is differentiated further with the adverb 'namely' [*nemlich*]. This word may, to be sure, be understood to signify a clarification or emphasis, as it more usually does. Yet insofar as nothing usual could be presupposed where it is an issue, in the first instance, of our abyssal 'beginning', 'nemlich' could also be taken to hover uncertainly between the words for 'naming' [*Nennen*] and 'taking' [*Nehmen*] that echo within it, marking our 'beginning' from the 'abyss' as one that would occur through the very sort of gesture that is performed in speaking of an 'abyss', while at the same time naming in advance the 'catching' [*fangen*] 'on' [*an*] that 'beginning' [*anfangen*] later spells out.<sup>10</sup> Along these lines, 'nemlich' would itself hang in the suspense between speaking and receiving in which 'we' would be caught with our every initiative, each time in a singular way.

Each of the essays collected in this issue exposes a radically 'singular occurrence' of linguistic 'differentiation' that, as such, marks a new beginning. Departing from the abyss that opens between title and text, Ian Balfour tests the premise that 'equivocation as to what constitutes the real beginning of the work could turn on whether or not the title is considered inside or outside the work, *ergon* or *parergon*'. Rather than argue for an ultimate decision regarding the constitutive role that *the* 'title' plays in *the* 'work', however, he exposes through a series of exemplary readings the interpretive work that is involved in entering into titular thresholds, and not without indicating the difference it may make if they are taken in the context of the poems they name, or in the context of other signature titles. The accent upon 'work' shifts towards the question of what first sentences 'have to work with' in Dominik Zechner's essay on, among others, Don DeLillo's 2007 novel *Falling Man*. Zeroing in upon its opening, 'It was not a street anymore but a world, a time and space of falling ash and near night', Zechner shows this initial 'coming-to-world' to be possible only upon a more initial parting through language, whose *with*-drawal from phenomenal reality and referential anchoring ('not a street') is what allows testimony to be given of 'a world' in the first place.<sup>11</sup>

Insofar as a 'beginning' may only become recognisable once it has 'a destination, an end' that 'allows it to *take place* so that it *has been*', going after the question of 'beginning' also entails raising the question of an 'end', whose imposition in classical texts such as Genesis marks 'a moment of sovereign violence'. It is this question that Saul Anton's contribution poses at the outset

of his reading of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Le Léviote d'Ephraïm*, where the beginning of the end will be disrupted with a critical gesture of naming that, in the same stroke, recalls the 'nameless' ones who 'remain outside the purview and domain of the law in the moment it comes into force'. At issue in Adam Rosenthal's contribution on William Wordsworth's *The Prelude* is also a 'force' of sorts, namely, the 'the force, insistence, or impetus of initiation, commencement, inception, genesis, and birth'. Since this demand will have structurally preceded any word that may be given of it, he argues, it is not only the case that each incipit 're-cites' the '*the event of a beginning that (it) is not*', for the originally citational character of the incipit also allows the beginning to be located 'in the most varied of places', such as the conditionals that punctuate *The Prelude*, demarcating the 'space between beginning and not-beginning' in which the writing can occur.

It is also within such a space that Hölderlin's 'fatherlandish songs' are shown to begin in Charles de Roche's contribution on 'The Beginnings of Fatherlandish Song and the Task of Answering the Mother in Hölderlin's *Am Quell der Donau*'. This time around, however, it is less a question of re-citation, so much as it is a matter of the origination of poetic speech in response to the 'parental instances evoked within the mythologic content' of Hölderlin's project. The manuscript materials for the abortive odes, 'Mother Earth' and 'German Song' – and finally, the more successful 'At the Source of the Danube' – indicate that 'fatherlandish song' is initially 'conceived' in answer to the 'mother', which turns out to be impossible to give until the 'mother' for this tongue is displaced and rendered foreign with 'Mother Asia'. Meanwhile, the 'musical context' to which 'prelude' will have already alluded in Rosenthal's essay comes to the fore in Jörg Kreienbrock's reading of Heimito von Doderer's *Die Strudlhofstiege; oder, Melzer und die Tiefe der Jahre*, which broaches its subject 'through the processes of what Doderer calls "interspersion" and "embedding", ornamental insertions that, insofar as they anticipate a future event, resemble the musical device of a "forefall"'. Insofar as this 'fore'-play is structured through 'intersecting cuts', the closure that appears to come with the marriage of the novel's protagonist in the end thus forecloses nothing: as from the beginning, the novel does not cease to demand 'a new ex-centric *Einsatz* (of the novel in parenthesis)'.<sup>1</sup>

Taking up once again the 'cause' that is implicit in not only the notion of a 'beginning', but also the plotted arc of a 'beginning, middle and end', Kristina Mendicino offers a reading of Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* as a text that demonstrates *ad absurdum* – or *ad abyssum*, in the sense that Hölderlin's lines on 'our' beginning suggest – how 'something else may also always happen' whenever 'plotted sequences, causal correlations and cinematic-cybernetic controls are related'. Yet as she argues, it is precisely because and not despite of the fact that there is 'no telling' what may have happened – because of the 'fact' that the language for stories and histories is 'ultimately and initially up in the air' – that the latter are anything but indifferent. The issue then ends – 'suddenly' – with an essay by Jan Mieszkowski that considers

the ‘controversial adverb’ that marks the incipit of Samuel Beckett’s *Texts for Nothing*: ‘Suddenly, no, at last, long last, I couldn’t any more, I couldn’t go on’.<sup>12</sup> Echoing the countless handbooks for writing that proscribe all word of suddenness where it is a matter of ‘showing’ surprise – no sooner is ‘suddenly’ said than it is followed with a ‘resounding “no”’ – both this word and the one that follows mark the interruptions that not only allow the text to ‘go on’ but also render each go at speaking a new beginning, rather than a continuation of anything that will have gone before ...

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 203; see Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 160.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Sloterdijk, *Zur Welt kommen*, 38; all translations from this work are ours.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 50.

<sup>6</sup> Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 161; see *Being and Time*, 204. With regard to a later work of Heidegger’s, we could have invoked the question whether language is reducible to a cultural technique that we can learn to master. Heidegger’s response is unambiguous: ‘To reflect on language [...] demands that we enter into the speaking of language in order to take up our stay within language, i.e., within its speaking, not within our own’. It is not us, as mortal humans, who simply make use of language to express ourselves to one another;

before any such ‘communication’ is possible or even thinkable, we must already have entered ‘into the speaking of language’ with regard to which we are not speakers but obedient listeners. One must have received the call of language in order to begin to speak. Each beginning within language is but a response to this very call that is issued not by an individual but by the opening-up of language itself. See Heidegger, ‘Language’, 188.

<sup>7</sup> Hamacher, “What Remains to Be Said,” 252–253.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 236.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> For a most precise discussion of the ‘incisive taking of names’ that takes place in Hölderlin’s ‘Der Rhein’, see Thomas Schestag, “allowed, disallowed,” 245.

<sup>11</sup> DeLillo, *Falling Man*, 3.

<sup>12</sup> Beckett, *Complete Short Prose*, 100.

## Disclosure statement

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