



## Finding a Tongue. Autobiography and Infancy in and beyond Joyce's *Portrait*

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### ABSTRACT IN ENGLISH

The outset of Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* presents a stage of life and language that is commonly evoked and, at the same time, systematically avoided in autobiographies as well as theoretical approaches to language: infancy. This textual strategy refers back to Augustine's *Confessiones*, one of the most canonical autobiographies, reading it as a mainstay for an unconventional hypothesis: Rather than understanding infancy as an early stage of, or even before, language, Joyce expounds that the condition called infancy – the openness for receiving language while being unable to master it – accompanies all speech, be it childlike or eloquent. The article analyses Joyce's text as one instance of a general paradox of autobiographical writing: initial aphasia. Setting out with birth or infancy, autobiographical texts precede articulate discourse. In Joyce, this paradox appears as starting point for a poetical – rather than theoretical – thinking about language, and language acquisition.

### ABSTRACT IN GERMAN

Der Beginn von Joyces *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* stellt eine Stufe des Lebens und der Sprache dar, die in autobiographischen wie sprachtheoretischen Texten ebenso gewöhnlich evoziert wie systematisch gemieden wird: das Infantile. Diese Textstrategie greift zurück auf Augustinus' *Confessiones*, eine der kanonischsten Lebensbeschreibungen, versteht diese jedoch als Ausgangspunkt für eine alles andere als kanonische Hypothese: Statt das Infantile als Frühzustand der (oder gar vor der) Sprache aufzufassen, stellt Joyce Infantilität – die Offenheit für die Sprache bei gleichzeitiger Unfähigkeit, sie

zu beherrschen – als Charakteristikum allen Sprechens und Schreibens dar, sei es kindisch oder wortgewandt. Der Beitrag liest den Beginn des Textes von Joyce als eine Artikulation einer generellen Paradoxie autobiographischen Schreibens: initialer Aphasie. Beginnen sie mit einem Rekurs zur Geburt oder der frühen Kindheit, gehen autobiographische Texte vor ihren artikulierten Diskurs zurück. Bei Joyce erscheint dieses Paradox als Ansatzpunkt eines poetischen statt theoretischen Nachdenkens über Sprachstrukturen und Spracherwerb.

*Keywords:* Joyce, St. Augustine, infancy, theory

## INTRODUCTION

A theoretical approach to life writing that seeks to comprise classical forms such as confessions and memoirs as well as latest variations of autobiographical genres in modern media cannot but find that autobiography tends to evade theoretical fixation. Attempts to define life writing seem to dissolve the matter instead of grasping it as the forms and modes of writing on one's own life differ historically, culturally, and individually in so many aspects: in what "life" is, in how far it is "one's own," in what shapes it and has to be taken into account, in the genres and conventions that allow to give an account of oneself and—neither last nor least—in the question of whether "life writing" means writing of life, instead of life, for life, or as life, etc. The difficulty in defining autobiographical writing is not due to a lack of precise criteria or norms proposed but, rather, appears as an actual peculiarity of autobiography: It evades conceptualization.

This article proposes that life writing, whichever shape it takes, is concerned not only with the formation of an individual subjectivity, but just as much with the formation of language, most notably when an autobiographical narration starts with birth or infancy. The quite conventional correlation between the outset of the narration and the beginning of the narrated life presents a difficulty for the theoretical fixation of life writing. Because taking recourse to birth and early childhood in the medium of language logically includes a recourse to infancy, that is to an organization of language which precedes articulate speech and the theoretical language of concepts. Autobiographical writing thus comprises a reflexivity hardly commented on: Autobiographical texts tongue the formation of their respective tongues and are, therefore, autobiographies not of only speaking subjects, but also of the language they speak.

Autobiographical writing reflects on both individual language acquisition and the structural relation between infancy and proficiency in articulate speech—which is in turn prerequisite to articulating structures such as subjectivity, identity, recollection, documentation, or fiction that are often proposed as criteria for defining autobiography. Autobiography can thus be described as a genre of form-giving: of testing, and shaping, the limits of its medium.

Reading autobiographical recourses to infancy is of interest not solely to studying forms and issues of life writing, but also to understanding language acquisition, a topic discussed broadly in linguistics and pedagogy. Autobiographical writing contributes to the discourse on infancy and linguistic development by expounding phenomena that escape the grasp of terminological language. Reading autobiographical texts that ponder the infantile may grant deeper insight into the structural and logical difficulties which theories of language acquisition seek to address and master.

This shifted focus on life writing—concentrating on its medium and presentation rather than on the narrated course of events—appears necessary especially in reading modern texts. At the beginning of the twentieth century, authors face a crisis of the concept of the subject and, consequently, of autobiography. Magris (217) notes the effect of this crisis: “The writer—Broch commenting on himself, Kafka and Musil—hasn’t got a ‘biography,’ he is only somebody who has lived and written; his autobiography can only configure itself as a ‘work programme’.”<sup>1</sup> Joyce belongs to the list of authors facing this issue, too. This paper will read sequences of his *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, first published in 1914/1915, not because this text should be regarded as Joyce’s curriculum vitae,<sup>2</sup> but because this novel reflects on the structure and complications of life writing. Joyce’s work on portraiture sets out with an outright autobiographical draft in 1904, called just *A Portrait of the Artist*. This short text states first of all:

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The features of infancy are not commonly reproduced in the adolescent portrait for, so capricious are we, that we cannot or will not conceive the past in any other than its iron memorial aspect. (Joyce in Scholes and Kain, 60)

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As Dettmar (115) notes, the portray finished in 1914 “reworked the core of the autobiographical material at the heart of *A Portrait of the Artist*,” the early draft—including, first of all, the “features of infancy.” Instead of noting the absence of infancy in eloquent self-portraits, the novel starts with portraying the infancy of speech. *A Portrait of the Artist as A Young Man* is no portray of Joyce, hence its protagonist does not speak in the

first person singular. For one thing is clear already in the 1904 draft: “a portrait is not an identificative paper” (Scholes and Kain, 60). What it is, however, becomes clear only during the ten years of working on it: The *Portrait* presents the process of forming the language it speaks, the process of looking for the right tone, of finding an apt equilibrium of fact and fiction, and this self-reflexivity is what makes it a key text of modern life writing.

Ellmann (154) explains the reflexivity in Joyce’s *Portrait* along the lines pointed out by Magris: “It is *a* portrait, not *the* portrait. If autobiography entails a repetition of the author’s life,” then what is repeated in the *Portrait* is growing up to be able to write that very text. Joyce does the same later so that, according to Ellmann, “Joyce’s portrait repeats itself, producing identity after identity. The process continues in Joyce’s later works, where the figure of the artist splits into father and son—Bloom and Stephen in *Ulysses*, HCE and Shem the Penman in *Finnegans Wake* (although in the first case, fatherhood is fictional rather than genetic).” Joyce’s point, however, is that neither the relation to others nor the relation to oneself is a given “fact,” but—just as well as language—subject of formation and, therefore, akin to poetry. Joyce connects his notion of portraiture to the notorious question of whether autobiography is fiction or documentation: What makes the genre interesting is precisely its position between the two. Autobiography is not at all opposed to fiction as it outlines what it means to form a character, neither is autobiography opposed to documentation insofar as it asks how it works to form an “I.” Joyce’s *Portrait* expounds that autobiographical texts are concerned with questions related to both documentation and fiction, hence they cannot be subsumed under any of the two. Autobiography, rather, points out a paradox that has to remain invisible in other discourses, as Schabacher writes: “Historiographical and juridical discourses know the problem of ‘fact’ and ‘fiction’ just as well, however, they demand a clear decision even though (...) it is ‘actually’ just as impossible, and impossible to justify, as in the case of autobiography.”<sup>3</sup>

A crucial complication that remains invisible in most discourses are the “features of infancy” at the beginning of every biography: Infancy undermines philosophy’s clear-cut distinction between humans capable of speech and all other beings incapable to talk or answer. Sharing essential features with both fiction and documentation, autobiographical texts raise doubts in the priority usually given to terminological language in speaking about the world. Taking recourse to the “features of infancy,” autobiography is a genre of reflecting on conventional notions not only of self and life, but just as well of language.

## RECOURSE TO INFANCY

Life writing is concerned with language formation and acquisition on a fundamental level. Of course hardly any conventional autobiographical narration starts with babble, however, many of them set out with a tale, or a figure of speech, addressing the problem that at the beginning of life, humans do not speak the articulate language that is the medium of the autobiographical endeavor and, therefore, initially actually inappropriate. Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and Augustine's *Confessions* are two notable instances to be analyzed in the following article, yet they are by far no exceptions. Rousseau, Goethe, and Chateaubriand, to name canonical authors, all start their autobiographical accounts with a variation of one theme: They all claim to have been, or have been mistaken for, stillborn.<sup>4</sup> Positioning the autobiographer beyond life and death, having "survived" both, this narrative demonstrates the extraordinary nature of the "I" portrayed in the respective text. And it justifies the autobiographical gesture that claims to comprise life as if it was already over and completed. Moreover, the stillborn-theme is also concerned with safeguarding the autobiographer's eloquent speech against the reduction to childlike stuttering, babble, or screaming: A recourse to a stillborn baby does not meet infancy but silence—a silence perfectly fitting the silence of a text. It was Cardano who invented the autobiographical theme of being stillborn, and his account makes clear that what is at stake in it is language: born *tanquam mortuus*, "as if dead," he sustains a speech defect, *lingua parum blaesus*, a "stammering" or "slurring tongue" (I, II, 2).

One way or the other, most autobiographical narrations take two fundamental structural difficulties into account: If an autobiography complies with one of the basic Western conventions of identifying narratives and begins with birth or infancy, it is liable to start with its own suspension. Because memory is suspended with infancy. At the outset of the chronology of the self there is a void. It can, of course, be filled with the memory of other people, or with later memories, but that does not change anything about the lacking possibility to certify the origin of the self. Yet even before an autobiographical text can articulate the mnemonic problem that Freud calls "infantile amnesia" (174), it faces a linguistic difficulty: If an autobiographical narration seeks to start where the "I" starts—be it with birth or early memories—, this narration has to start where the autobiographer's articulate language is not yet developed or acquired: with infancy. The mode of speech that would be appropriate to tell of birth, infancy, and language acquisition is one that screams, keeps silent, babbles, or stammers—infantile language at the edge of speech. A lexically, grammatically, syntactically, and otherwise correct,

articulate language in contrast denies the infantile rather than voicing it. In speaking of the beginning of life, life writing provokes a suspension of articulate language, its reduction to inarticulate babbling. The initial lack of memories is thus not the first problem that a chronological narrative of one's own life faces. It is, rather, the immense difficulty that if the text seeks to speak adequately of the infantile beginning of life, it cannot speak articulated—which raises the question of how to speak comprehensively. Before the autobiographer's infantile amnesia, there is the autobiography's initial aphasia.

Unlike the mnemonic difficulty in telling of one's own infancy, the initial aphasia that such a narrative faces cannot be avoided by just naming it and thus presenting the narrative as aware of its shortcomings because the initial aphasia undermines exactly the articulate language capable of assigning unambiguous names to clearly differentiated things. Neither can this linguistic difficulty of autobiography simply be ignored. For if the narrative of a life speaks, right from the start, the autobiographer's articulate language without questioning it in any way, the "I" is presented as always having been able to speak exactly that way. This, however, makes the difference between the one who writes, the autobiographer, and the one who is written on, her or his former self, collapse: Then the one who tells of him- or herself has always been the one he or she is now, in the moment of telling about the own life—which means that there is nothing to tell, no past to recall, no difference between, for instance, the artist and the young man.

To be sure, by far not every autobiographical text sets out with birth or infancy. Many texts undermine the chronological form and challenge the notion that one is identified by what is past. And yet every autobiographical text is affected by initial aphasia. Because an autobiographical text is not merely a list of what has been, not even a chronological one. Autobiographies are not dictated by any laws of memory but, quite the reverse, outline the structures that can be called memory, recollection, and life. Autobiographies are, literally, accounts of a life written by the protagonist her- or himself, voicing former experiences of the one who is writing. Autobiographical writing presents, by means of language, what has been, and that is, among many other things, the autobiographer's former language. Therefore, insofar as it tongues past experiences of the one who is speaking, autobiographical writing cannot but take a recourse in language, no matter where in particular it starts: with birth, infancy, or yesterday. Autobiographical writing thus appears as a movement in language: speech returning to an earlier state, even to infancy, in order to become articulate again, to be formed anew. Autobiography is a regression of articulate language that speaks of how language takes shape.

The autobiographical recourse in language does not lead to any firm ground of, or in, language but expounds an abyss. Two classical texts illustrate this: Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* mocks the autobiographical gesture in the protagonist's endless attempt to start the tale of himself, "as Horace says, ab Ovo" (4), from his conception and the events which led to it. This is, of course, exactly the opposite of what Horace recommends, and it does not succeed in Sterne. Without any satirical intent, Chateaubriand positions himself as writing *Mémoires d'outre-tombe*, memories from beyond the grave. Both of these quite different texts point out that birth and death are not at all the unalterable limits of life writing—and neither are infantile foreignness to articulate speech and muteness limits of the autobiographical movement in language. With regard to language, birth and death appear as irritatingly similar extremes, reducing articulation to stammering, screaming, or silence. Yet the autobiographical recourse in language expounds that these extremes are by no means non-linguistic but, rather, the edge from where every so-called speaker comes into language, and to where every speaker ceases in death. One insight into the structure of language granted by reading the autobiographical recourse to infancy is that it is possible to acquire language only because infantile foreignness to articulate speech, and even muteness, are open to articulate language, not strictly separate from it. For even in babble, stammer, and silence articulate language does appear—as what is missing. Reading life writing with regard to poetic portrayals of language acquisition and formation may significantly modify the notion of language as presented in linguistics and pedagogy, which dominate the discourse on infancy. The recourse to infancy in life writing points out that what fundamentally belongs to language is—apart from sign systems and competence in their usage—already the openness for acquiring language, the need for speech. This insight pertains not solely to infants' language acquisition: Autobiographical recourses to infancy also point out that having acquired a language does not mean that it is at one's disposal. In seeking to voice and portray infancy, for instance, the autobiographer's eloquent language may turn just as infantile.

These two structures—the infantile openness for language and the impossible complete mastery of language—question indispensable assumptions, or better: requisite fictions, of terminological language: the stability of linguistic structures, and the distance between observer and observed. Literary language does not rest on these assumptions and can, therefore, explore structural aspects of infancy and language acquisition that cause complications in theoretical approaches. Joyce's *Portrait* is such a text that features infancy with a heuristic claim that exceeds playfulness.

JOYCE'S *PORTRAIT*, LEAPING INTO LANGUAGE

Joyce (7) sets out not with birth or the awakening of consciousness, but in medias res (the technique Horace recommends):

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Once upon a time and a very good time it was there was a moocow coming down along the road and this moocow that was coming down along the road met a nicens little boy named baby tuckoo. ...

His father told him that story: his father looked at him through a glass: he had a hairy face.

He was baby tuckoo. The moocow came down the road where Betty Byrne lived: she sold lemon platt.<sup>5</sup>

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Father and son let each other appear: *Baby tuckoo* is named first, but the second paragraph clarifies that it appears in a story told by the father, who thus precedes his son. Yet when first mentioned, the father is called *his father*, which is to say that he is already seen from the son's point of view. He can only be called a *father* if he is somebody's father, so that while he produces the child biologically, the child does, logically, just as much produce the father. This bio-logical mutuality is mirrored in the mutual glances through the *glass*: The son appears as soon as he looks at the father's *hairy face*. In the third sentence this mutuality collapses into indistinguishability. *He was baby tuckoo* and the following may be read as the child's tale as well as the father's words.<sup>6</sup> It is impossible to decide between these alternatives just as it is impossible to tell definitively what the *glass* is by means of which son and father see each other. It may be the eyeglass that appears later in the *Portrait*,<sup>7</sup> or a drinking glass.<sup>8</sup> Helpful for reading this ambiguity is a passage from Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians, that has been pointed out as a pretext for the beginning of Joyce's *Portrait*: "For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known" (1 Cor 13:12).<sup>9</sup> Rather than portraying mutuality—be it in language acquisition or in the prosopopeia as, according to de Man, the trope of autobiography—Paul holds out the eschatological prospect of the end of restriction by perspective, the final clearance under the eyes of God. In the *Portrait*, there is no such prospect; on the contrary, in the indistinct *glass*, all attention is drawn to the medium that makes father and son appear: language. It makes things appear *darkly* and enigmatic in Joyce, such as the father's *glass*, yet without this medium, there is nothing to be seen, no *moocow coming down along the road*.<sup>10</sup> The previous line in Paul's letter presents an utterly different notion of language: "When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became

a man, I put away childish things" (1 Cor 13:11). Joyce's text presents no such linear development. It speaks in an infantile manner of "childish things" not simply because it voices *baby tuckoo's* speech, but also because the child's father infantilizes his speech while talking to his son. Instead of opposing eloquent, correct, articulate adult speech and inarticulate babbling, Joyce's *Portrait* presents infantile speech as one of many options of speaking a language—and as a favorite one exactly when understanding is at stake. For what is indeed hard to understand about the opening of Joyce's text is: Why, and whence, the *moocow*?

Before the text assigns the initial tale (at least darkly) to some speakers, there is nothing but the words evoking the coming *moocow*. It seems as if Joyce presents a childish version of the opening of the Gospel of John, which is organized in the same sequence: "In the beginning is the Word," then the father, to whom the word is ascribed ("and the word was with God") (Jn 1:1), and finally the son whom he shapes by means of the word ("And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, [and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,]"; Jn 1:14). John insists that the word, medium of creation, was with God from the very beginning,<sup>11</sup> and the outset of Joyce's text can be read accordingly: In the tale of the *moocow*, the father has the word, by means of which he makes the son appear. Yet the father does not have the word right from the start, neither in John nor in Joyce. The word precedes him and is, in the course of this utterance, only ascribed to him. Paradoxically, in the beginning there appears to be indeed nothing but the word. Joyce's tale of the *moocow* demonstrates that assumptions which seem prerequisite to comprehending any word—namely, that there is both a speaker and a language to which the word belongs—can be made only in retrospect.<sup>12</sup> *Once* a word has been said it can be assumed that it is said by someone, that it belongs to a language in which it differs from all other words, and that it complies with the phonetic, morphological, grammatical and other conventions of that language (or transgresses them, such as the word *nicens*). But no sooner. The word hurries on ahead, *once upon a time* that no subsequent assumption about its prerequisites can ever catch up with. Still, these assumptions are indispensable in order to understand the word, even if they can never actually, literally, comprehend it. Yet if, once a word is said, one has to assume that it belongs to a language since any word is a word only in the context of a language—how, then, is it possible that infants begin to speak single words and only become familiar with language as a whole? This complex issue is what is in question in the seemingly simple tale of the *moocow* that keeps on *coming down along the road*: How does it come that a child, all at *once*, almost leaps into language?

The outset of Joyce's *Portrait* is marked by a tension that culminates in the double structure of the *moo-cow*'s name. Pierce says this is "how adults imagine a child learns a language. First take the object, then associate it with a sound. (...) Cows moo. Turn it round in this case, and you have the word 'moocow'" (177). Yet how could one "take" any object before knowing its name, or being aware of the very concept of a name? At its outset, the *Portrait* portrays how the human language of words is comprehended and acquired. Therefore, in Joyce, the cow is not "taken" as an "object," named, and then imitated. The word *moocow* seeks to correspond to what it names by way of echoing what the cow herself utters. The sound makes the animal appear so that it can be named in an articulate manner. The order is not just a matter of detail here. Joyce's text portrays infancy not as babbling, but as a state of complex, and unanswerable, questions: Why do articulate words not correspond to what they name? Why do they sound differently? And how does it come that they still do let something appear? The *Portrait* asks how the visible and audible aspect of a word relates to what it claims to represent, evoke and replace. The fissure in the name of the *moo-cow* offers an opening for leaping into language.

Yet the *Portrait* also points out that the gap between *moo* and *cow* will remain an open wound in speech. The *moocow* keeps on *coming down along the road* as the question of how a word comes into being—a "sound sense symbol," as *Finnegans Wake* (612, 29) puts it. As such, the *moocow* entails, for instance, the question why Ireland is proverbially called "silk of the kine," as the grown-up protagonist of the *Portrait* explains in *Ulysses* (14), that is the most beautiful of all cows. The *moocow* allows of many interpretations, yet she is absorbed in none.<sup>13</sup> She is what enables comprehension but is never fully comprehended by one, or many, concepts. We will, in other words, never know where she comes from. The autobiographically crucial insight at the outset of Joyce's *Portrait* is that language is not the only thing the origin of which is neither known nor knowable, for it seems that this is also true for the child. In both cases, discourse allows to identify, trace, and give reasons, but all of this only in retrospect, and without any instance to give certification.

The pronouns tell that the child is male, however, it is not called 'son' but *baby tuckoo*. Unlike *moocow*, this name does not comprise an echo of what it names, but a distorted echo of a different animal's utterance, and a rhyme with a word: 'cuckoo.' Thus the child's name appears to echo the rhyme and reason the father sees in the child's origin: 'Cuckoo' designated not only the bird but also—in transference of the bird's most characteristic trait onto humans—a child who is foisted on someone. Hence *baby tuckoo* names the child a baby who is not one's own but "tucked in," accepted as one's own. The identification *He was baby tuckoo*

can be read as both the father's and the son's words: Both accept as theirs what seems to have no origin in themselves. The father accepts the son and the paternal role without the chance (at least in 1914) to prove him his offspring, as much as the son accepts the name *baby tuckoo* when he sees himself addressed by it, even though one cannot prove that he was addressed in the tale. The impossibility of irrefutable proof is what links paternity with the referential connection between sign and signified. Neither fatherhood, nor a reference (nor, for that matter, the reading of the baby's name as a contraction of "cuckoo" and "to tuck") can be proven, since what allows of the respective interpretation—the child, the word—is necessarily prior to comprehension. Every possible understanding still owes the child, or the word, something: For it might just as well be the father's own son, while he might have not addressed the child as *baby tuckoo* in the tale (and the previous reading of the name might ignore many of its facets). The name *moocow* seeks to speak adequately of the animal, without owing it anything, therefore it adds the animal's sound to the word—which, however, only underlines that the articulate words of human language are not appropriate to what they name. According to Joyce's *Portrait*, what is crucial for leaping into language are, consequently, not the referential links—or, rather, gaps—between the names and the named, but assonances, rhymes, echos.

Portraying infancy and language acquisition, Joyce follows the echos of both non-human sounds and other words in the articulated words in order to leap into language, because words of any language have a meaning only in difference to all other words. These echos are not necessarily imitations but, rather, sound-relations that work without a model or proof. What counts is that they allow to grasp the meaning of unknown words. For while the double name of the *moo-cow* illustrates what it names, not everything that can be named has a sound; *coming down along the road*, for instance, might well be noiseless. The mere repetition of this phrase does not explain it, and the explanation in other words would only multiply the problem that an infant does not understand words—unless, it seems, there is a phonetic or visual connection to these other words, an echo, such as a rhyme, or a meter. In Joyce's *Portrait*, material connections allow to understand semantic relations; this is how the text portrays language acquisition and, consequently, how the text itself can be read. A song sang at the outset of the text (7) makes this clear:

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*O, the wild rose blossoms*

*On the little green place.*

He sang that song. That was his song.

*O, the geen wothe botheth.*

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In the last line, Anderson's edition of the *Portrait* inserts "green" to emend the manuscript's "geen" given in Johnson's edition. The correction is rather uncalled for since it erases the very hermeneutic point of this passage: Though irregular, the third line of the song can be made comprehensible by way of a phonetic comparison to the previous lines. It appears as a lisping variation of their wording, proposing "the green rose blossoms," or "bushes." As Gordon (4) writes, such acts of "assimilation," of linking what seems alike in some sense, is the dominant hermeneutical operation in the *Portrait*.<sup>14</sup> What counts in the song at the beginning of the text is the meter and sound while the reference is neglected. If there are indeed green roses is a question that occurs to the child only much later.<sup>15</sup> In Joyce, not the semantic dimension of words is pivotal to learning them, but their phonetic shape.<sup>16</sup> Thus the passage continues (7):

His mother (...) played in the piano the sailor's hornpipe for him to dance. He danced:

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*Tralala lala,  
Tralala tralaladdy,  
Tralala lala,  
Tralala lala.*

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The play with sound effects of language and its links to the natural world, most notably in *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*, is a mainstay of Joyce scholarship. This prominent aspect of Joyce's writing is, however, not usually related to the logic and structure of the *Portrait* and of life writing in general. Joyce's presentation of language acquisition following aesthetic lines that make semantics accessible is a far-reaching revision of canonical philosophical notions of both language and language learning, formulated in one of the most canonical autobiographical narratives: Augustine's *Confessions*.

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*cum ipsi (maiores homines) appellabant rem aliquam, et cum secundum eam vocem corpus ad aliquid movebant, videbam, et tenebam hoc ab eis vocari rem illam, quod sonabant, cum eam vellent ostendere. (...) ita verba in variis sententiis locis suis posita, et crebro audita, quarum rerum signa essent, paulatim colligebam, measque iam voluntates, edomito in eis signis ore, per haec enuntiabam. (I,8,13:20–4)*

"When they (my elders) named some object, and accordingly moved towards something, I saw this and grasped that that the thing was called by the sound they uttered when they meant to point it out. (...) Thus, as I heard words repeatedly used in their proper places in various sentences, I gradually learnt to understand what objects they signified; and after I had trained my mouth to form these signs, I used them to express my desires."

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Writing after Joyce and aiming at a revision of the concepts of language and understanding, too, Wittgenstein notes on the above passage: “Augustine describes the learning of human language as if the child came into a strange country and did not understand the language (...), as if it already had a language, only not this one” (§32). What Wittgenstein points to is that Augustine’s account of language acquisition, ruled by semantics, presupposes rather than communicates an understanding of what *signifying* means. “Here,” Wittgenstein thus says, “the teaching of language is not explanation, but training” (§5). Yet infantile language acquisition is not mere vocabulary training; it also comprises understanding what a vocabulary is. The outset of Joyce’s *Portrait*—a text acutely aware of the theological and philosophical traditions it evokes, and contradicts—points at exactly this foundation. The priority of language’s material form might make Joyce’s depiction of language acquisition seem playful, yet it entails drastic consequences: If the process of acquiring speech and becoming articulate follows phonetic structures, it draws no dividing line between human, so-called linguistic sounds and others (such as *moo*), and between the so-called proper sense of a word on the one hand and the so-called metaphorical sense on the other, and thus between proper and improper, such as metaphorical, or catachrestical language use—conventionally the seminal dividing line between theory and poetry. Joyce’s *Portrait* suggests conclusions of a different kind: Once an infant has become an articulate speaker of any language, he or she is able to draw dividing lines fundamental to Western thinking, pertaining not least to language as an exclusively human faculty, such as human versus animal, language vs. sound, meaningful vs. senseless, or theoretical vs. poetical. Yet Joyce’s *Portrait* expounds that these distinctions are irrelevant to and, therefore, absent from the process of acquiring language—which means that while they might be fundamental to theoretical thinking, they are arbitrary and untenable with regard to the structures of language.

### OPENNESS FOR LANGUAGE

Instead of finding firm ground for, or an origin of, language, the autobiographical recourse to infancy reveals a persistent inability to control language. The recourse often appears as an attempt to seize the origin and genesis of articulate speech. Already Augustine’s canonical *Confessions*, however, outline that *infantia* is more than a temporary epoch of life:

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*nec discessit illa: quo enim abiit? et tamen iam non erat.* (I,8,13:10–11)

“It did not pass, for where would it have gone? And yet it was no more.”

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Augustine arrives at this paradox when he revisits the beginning of life, looking at what “other infants” (*alios infantes*) do since what he finds in his own recollection is infantile amnesia: *nam ista mea non memini* (I,6,8:10–11)—“because of myself I do not remember it.” What he does recall is talking:

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*non enim eram infans, qui non farer, sed iam puer loquens eram. et memini hoc*  
(I,8,13:11–12)

“For I was (no longer) an infant who does not speak, I was now a talking boy. I remember that.”

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In spite of Augustine’s personal recollection, there remains a loose end in the transition from infancy to conscious talking, marked subtly by a verb change: With *infans* (...) *non farer* on the one hand and *puer loquens* on the other, Augustine makes use of a difference between the Latin verb *fari*, “speaking,” and *loqui*, “talking.” *Fari* is what the *in-fans* is literally unable to do, it is the root of the noun, yet it is not what the boy has acquired; he does not become a “*puer fans*”. The obvious explanation for the verb shift is that *fari* is rarely used to denote active speaking but more common in compounds or passives, for instance in *fatum* (“fate”). Augustine expounds the rationale that appears to be expressed in the usage of the verbs: It hints at a structural difficulty of language acquisition. *Farer*, the mastery of language that the in-fant lacks, remains unrealized in the boy’s speech and even in the autobiographer’s eloquence. This is not a matter of individual capability or talent. The inability to master it appears as a persistent trait of language because even after having acquired language, no one is able to do what, according to Augustine, the infant is unable to do: to speak by means of signs that are actually appropriate to what they name, *signa* (...) *veresimilia* (I,6,8:15–17)—“verily similar signs.” The infantile word *moocow* attempts to be such a sign by authenticating the referential link by the animal’s sound, yet even here, the actual sound alone is not enough.

The infant leaps into language, yet the gap that allows to do so—between *moo* and *cow*—runs through human language as a fissure: No word or sentence is ever actually similar to what it refers to and, therefore, never says exactly what it shall say but always less, and more, that is to say something else. Yet autobiographical writing analyzes the paradox that the incomprehensible meaninglessness of words and names is a condition for language acquisition. For if the words of a language were perfectly appropriate to what they name, unambiguous, absolutely clear, and dictated by the named object, these words would leave no room to hear, to understand, and to answer them. Neither would such a language (that

would in fact be no language but a mechanical code) give any opportunity to acquire it. With Joyce and Augustine, the infant's babbling and foreignness to articulate speech appear not as a prelingual state devoid of any relation to language that no text could touch upon,<sup>17</sup> but as pivotal to articulate language. The infant rim of speech expounded in life writing is an openness for language. The terminological and logical ruptures Augustine and Joyce dwell on appear not as difficulties that have to be closed by means of theoretical terminology, but as inconsistencies which leave room for individual language acquisition.

Jakobson (14) points out that acquiring a language means imitating as well as transforming it: "The child creates as [it] borrows." This is possible only if language includes the possibility of being altered so that learning means not only following rules and habits, but if there is also a fissure, or gap, in the structure of language opening it for other forms and new usages. Joyce's *Portrait* locates this opening for new forms and speakers in the distance between signifying language and the world's noises. The *Portrait's* autobiographical recourse in language outlines that infancy is more than a transitory phase of life and speech, namely a proleptic structure prerequisite to speaking, understanding, and finding one's tongue. The prolepsis is thus: Listening to any speech, or reading any text, rests on the assumption that something comprehensible will be said, or written, in some language. This assumption has to be made in advance, yet it cannot be negotiated as that would require words and sentences which—again—would have to be heard and listened to. That something comprehensible will be said can only be anticipated in a leap ahead into what is not yet speech or text, but indispensable to language. Whether or not that supposition was justified can be judged only in retrospect, once something as been said or read. This is why Joyce, paradoxically, begins the *Portrait* by underlining the retrospective outlook of understanding language.

All speech is affected by the initial aphasia expounded in autobiographical writing, not solely narrations of infancy; on the contrary, autobiographical narrations of infancy expound an openness for language that pertains to all forms of language use. But of course there is one more thing that makes it more complicated: The same opening for language that allows to acquire speech also, and at the same time, threatens to silence it.

## ACQUISITION AND TRAUMA

At the outset of Joyce's *Portrait* (7–8) the threat of being silenced is voiced when the child is given a proper name:

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He hid under the table. His mother said:

—O, Stephen will apologise.

Dante said:

—O, if not, the eagles will come and pull out his eyes.

*Pull out his eyes,*

*Apologise,*

*Apologise,*

*Pull out his eyes.*

*Apologise,*

*Pull out his eyes,*

*Pull out his eyes,*

*Apologise.*

---

The order *Stephen will apologize* accuses him of owing an apology without explaining what he is guilty of; it appears as incomprehensible to the reader as to the child. The child is, as it were, baptized by the order to apologize, and this appears as no coincidence given that “Stephen” is the name of the first Christian martyr.<sup>18</sup> The threat following the mother’s order varies a line from the Book of Proverbs: “The eye that mocketh at his father, and despiseth to obey his mother, the ravens of the valley shall pick it out, and the young eagles shall eat it.” (Prv 30:17) The obedient child, this is to say, follows blindly. The mother’s incomprehensible order, however, cannot be followed because it does not explicate any expectations with regard to the subject of the offense or the addressee of the apology. It imposes a guilt onto the child to which no apology can ever correspond: The order *Stephen will apologize* predicts a compensation by way of the λόγος, language and rationality, so that Stephen will always have to go on speaking in his defense, and will never say enough since it is impossible to articulate all language and rationality. In Joyce’s *Portrait*, Stephen is the martyr of language.

What makes the order a traumatizing blow is that unlike the father’s infantile tale of the *moo-cow*, the mother’s proper usage of what just now becomes the child’s mother tongue does not explicate the referential connection between name and named. Unlike the didactic *moo-cow*, neither the words of the order and threat nor the name “Stephen” even comment on the gap between sign and thing. Reference is not explained but dictated. The mother and her duplicate do not even need to see the child under the table in order to name it, threaten it, and tell it what to do. The name is enough. The shock is that the name is arbitrary and that there is, still, no way to escape from being named and thus evoked. Names, inappropriate as they are, make things appear that are not visible such as Stephen, and not even there, such as *the eagles*. The answer to this blow, given in a song, is an apotropaic echo responding to the rhyme of the order and threat as the only thing about them that can be grasped. In the song the sound

of language, Attridge says, “overwhelms its rational communicative function: words are progressively emptied of their meaning” (135). Docherty reads the song along the same lines, stating that “in the corporeality of the word, understanding is lost” (124). Yet this is already true for the mother’s order and Dante’s thread insofar as the meaning of their words give no reasons to comprehend or expectations to fulfil but seem to aim merely at silencing the child. The distinction between sound and sense is vain when there is nothing to understand, and when the communicative function is exactly this: forbidding someone to speak. However, the song’s sound effect of rhyme and meter in fact entails semantic effects: The song voices the requested apology, even if it is impossible to say whether it “actually means it.” In its repetitive structure, however, the song also depicts the blinding, separately for every eye. Ignoring all grammatical subjects just as the child under the table was ignored, the song voices the violence that seeks to silence the child by way of an order that leaves no room for an answer.

This second, traumatic rather than playful primal scene of language acquisition adds an important aspect to Joyce’s notion of language: In comparison to individual sounds and natural noises, codified articulate language comes as a violent shock—and is acquired as a means to respond to this violence. In this second scene, Joyce’s *Portrait* analyzes not how but why the highly regulated human language is acquired. Rousseau ponders on this fundamental yet rarely posed question, too, and finds mostly reasons against the formation of human language.<sup>19</sup> What Joyce points out is, remarkably, not the infant’s will to communicate (sound structures seem to suffice here) but the necessity of finding a means of resistance against assaults of being named and told what to do, or be, that is: a remedy against the panic language causes. In retrospect, it seems that the fissure between *moo* and *cow* illustrates not only the opening for acquiring language but, at the same time, the violent, both ignorant and dictating relation to the world inherent in words that makes it necessary to acquire language. For who- and whatever cannot talk back will be ignored such as the cow’s *moo* is ignored in proper language, and controlled, such as cows’ lives and deaths are.

The autobiographical recourse in language back to infancy expounds a certain, not merely childish but general inability to control language as prerequisite for any speech. Touching, moreover, upon silence, muteness, and violence, readings of this recourse are often accompanied, and impeded, by fear. Jakobson analyzes to the “linguistic development of the child” in order to explore, by way of analogy, the development of “the languages of the world” (8). He examines “the transition from babbling to language” (24), insisting that articulate language is neither similar nor related to “the prelanguage babbling,” which is, according to him, a question “of external phonetics, predominantly articulatory in nature” (27).<sup>20</sup> In the same manner Jakobson does, on the one hand, assume that the

examination of aphasias reveals general structures of language, insisting, on the other hand, that aphasias are a merely pathological “destruction” (34), not at all a general trait of language. The examination of the destruction of language seems to be afflicted with the fear of actually destroying it and reducing the linguist’s eloquent study to mere babble. Drawing a strict dividing line between the infantile as a mere prelingual state and articulate, proper language seeks to evade the conclusion that the regression to infancy otherwise necessitates: that articulate language is open to the infantile just as much as the infant is open to acquire articulate language. Expounding the interrelation between infancy and articulate speech is an important heuristic feature auf autobiographical writing.

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## NOTES

- 1 Translation quoted as given in d'Alessandro (14).
- 2 For identifying facts in Joyce's fiction see Gifford (4): "Joyce depended heavily on the people, events, and environments in his own life for models of the characters and events in his fiction. This is a commonplace of scholarship on Joyce, and indeed much

of that scholarship has been devoted to researching Joyce's personal environments and to identifying the autobiographical elements of his work. (...) Presumably every novelist relies to some extent on the range and vocabulary of his personal experience. In this respect Joyce is no different in kind from other novelists, although he may be so different in degree as to appear different in kind. But once the event or the person (...) is transferred from 'fact' to the page (and inevitably transformed in the process), the 'true' nature of the event or person loses much of its relevance for the reader who is attempting to grasp the form and meanings inherent in the fiction itself."

- 3 My translation.
- 4 Cf. Rousseau (1959, 7): *J'étois né presque mourant* (...); Goethe (10): *kam ich für tot auf die Welt* (...); Chateaubriand (17): *J'étais presque mort quand je vins au jour*.
- 5 Unless noted otherwise, all quotation from this text follow Anderson's edition.
- 6 Many readings ignore the latter option, cf. Kershner (606): *The child's ego immediately appropriates the words*. Kenner (115), Erzgräber (7).
- 7 *Mr Dedalus screwed his glass into his eye and stared hard at both his sons* (72).
- 8 Read as a drinking glass (cf. 28), the language appears as both infantile and delirious. A comment in *Finnegans Wake* (435, 20–21) suggests that: *Once upon a drunk and a fairly good drunk it was and the rest of your blatherumskite!*
- 9 Cf. Senn (104). According to Scholes and Kain (264), Joyce took notes from the *Kind James Version*, the "'Protestant' Bible," not from the Catholic *Douay-Rheims Bible*.
- 10 The Greek phrase in 1 Cor 13:12 reads: *δι' ἑσόπτρου ἐν αἰνίγματι* (*Novum testamentum Graece*, 27), "in the mirror as enigma." If the *glass* at the outset of Joyce's text is read as a mirror, the *Portrait* outlines a scene of shaving similar to the one at the beginning of *Ulysses*.
- 11 Cf. Jn 1:1–3: *and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him* (...).
- 12 John's text says that just as well by insisting on the sequence of word and God. Pierce (175) misses this point when he insists that "St. John (...) might have been the first to recognise that what he was articulating is a conceit, for words are uttered by someone, so there must be something or somebody that precedes the utterance. Moreover, the word, any word, belongs to a pre-existing language."
- 13 In this respect, "the whole book is" indeed, as Kenner says, "about the encounter of baby tuckoo with the moocow." That, however, means much more than just the confrontation with "the Freudian infantile analogue of God the Father" Kenner outlines (114). Just as little is the *moocow* merely a symbol of the maternal, as Tindall (79) suggests; his reading pays no heed to the double name at all: "Innumerable connotations of word and phrase make it almost plain at last that the road suggests tradition, that the cow suggests church, country, and all maternal things".
- 14 Cf. 9: *He kept his hands in the side pockets of his belted grey suit. That was a belt round his pocket. And belt was also to give a fellow a belt. One day a fellow said to Cantwell: /—I'd give you such a belt in a second.*
- 15 *But you could not have a green rose. But perhaps somewhere in the world you could.* (12).
- 16 Cf. 7: *He danced: / "Tralala lala, / Tralala tralaladdy, / Tralala lala, / Tralata lala."*
- 17 A notion often voiced with and without allusion to Joyce's *Portrait*; cf. Voutta (78).
- 18 Cf. Acts 6:5–8:4.
- 19 Rousseau (1964, 146) calls them "les embarras de l'origine des langues."
- 20 Jakobson expounds that articulate language is not affected by "the so-called babbling period" because "the child then loses nearly all of [its] ability to produce sounds in passing over from the pre-language stage to the first acquisition of words, i.e., to the first genuine stage of language." (21) Pivotal in examining the infants' linguistic development is, therefore, he concludes, a "sufficient delimitation of the relevant components of language from pre-linguistic, external, or linguistically irrelevant elements" (28).