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Urs Allemann's Beginnings



Patrick Greaney

In the past twenty years, few literary events have caused as much controversy in German-speaking Europe as the awarding of second prize (the “Ingeborg Bachmann Preis des Landes Kärnten”) in the 1991 Ingeborg Bachmann Competition to Urs Allemann’s *Babyficker*.¹ In a list prepared for the newsmagazine *Spiegel* of the top forty-five scandals between 1949 and 1999, the “Allemann affair” is one of only three cultural events listed.² The announcement of the prize sparked vehement reactions from the right and the left, ranging from a statement by Jörg Haider in a full-page newspaper advertisement to a spectacular attack, before a reading, in which a group of masked protestors covered Allemann in red oil paint as a protest against his putative aestheticization of rape and violence against children.³

For those readers unable to deduce the subject matter and the motivation of these attacks from the title, the text’s first sentence clears things up: “I fuck babies” [*Ich ficke Babys*]. This sentence is declared by a Beckettian voice, which continues, in the seventy-two pages that follow, to describe some of the technicalities of this act. But this voice also undercuts the text by thematizing the difficulties of the text’s composition, and it also raises the possibility that the narrator’s sentence does not refer to his activity (7). A few pages into the book, the opening sentence appears again, in a juxtaposition that reveals the philosophical stakes of Allemann’s text: “I fuck babies. Therefore I am, maybe” [*Ich ficke Babys. Also bin ich vielleicht*] (11). In this parody of the cogito, Allemann makes explicit the link that will be the focus of my reading: the relation between his text’s violent thematic content and a literary voice’s mode of existence.

As a starting point for my reading and to frame its theoretical claims, I would like to look briefly at some of the statements made by Allemann and his critics in the debates surrounding *Babyficker*. In a 2004 interview, Allemann insists that he was surprised how the text's subject matter overshadowed its style: "I set out with the goal . . . to write about this appalling topic in a text that people would then say was a beautiful text" [*Ich hatte mir vorgenommen . . . zu diesem grauenhaften Thema einen Text zu machen, von dem die Leute nachher sagen würden, es ist ein schöner Text*] (Mair). He goes on to say, "Maybe it was a bit hubristic to make that kind of demand on aesthetics" [*Das war vielleicht ein Stück Hybris, der Ästhetik das zuzumuten*]. Maybe it was, but a number of reviewers responded just as Allemann intended, including *Spiegel* reviewer and Bachmann Competition jury member Hellmuth Karasek, who writes, "Allemann's text *Babyficker* makes clear that the rape that occurs in it is only carried out in jest" [*Allemanns Text Babyficker macht kenntlich, daß in ihm nur zum 'Spaß' geschändet wird*] (Karasek 174).

But Karasek's reaction fails to take account of the disturbing force of Allemann's text. Any reader of *Babyficker* knows that it is no joke. The choice of content is neither arbitrary nor neutral, as one of Allemann's critical opponents insists: "Oh, a metaphor. But coincidentally a metaphor and a sentence that describe an extreme, violent reality, a sentence that therefore is simply not available for the presentation of any other issues" [*Aha, eine Metapher. Zufälligerweise aber eine Metapher, ein Satz, der eine extreme, gewalttätige Realität bezeichnet, ein Satz, der deshalb einfach nicht frei verfügbar ist zur Einkleidung irgendwelcher anderer Probleme*] (Morf). It would be naïve to think that literary language could make its thematic content disappear, and Allemann is not naïve.

In a 1991 interview, Allemann offers a summary account of the critical reactions to his text:

Either my text and reality exist in a crude 1-to-1 relation, and in this case, even if I'm not an actual babyfucker, then at the very least I'm someone expressing his secret fantasies in his writing. Or, if this is not the case, then it's autonomous language in which the relation to reality is completely arbitrary. Of course, that is equally false. . . .

Entweder wird der Bezug meines Textes zur Realität krude 1:1 genommen, dann bin ich, wenn nicht real ein Babyficker, zumindest einer, der mit lustzitternder Hand seine geheimen Wunschphantasien aufs Papier bringt. Oder aber, wenn das nicht der Fall ist, dann muß es sich um autonome Sprache handeln, wo der Bezug zur Realität völlig austauschbar ist. Das ist natürlich ebenso falsch. . . . (Löffler 103)⁴

Allemann offers a third way to understand his text: “I’m interested to see if one can reach new realms of actuality if one simply doesn’t recognize these dichotomies” [*Mich interessiert, ob man an neue Wirklichkeitsbereiche rankommt, wenn man diese Dichotomien einfach nicht anerkennt*] (Löffler 103). Allemann aims to present a “realm of actuality” whose specific constitution calls into question the facile alternatives that have determined his reception, and in this way his text forces the reader to rethink concepts such as “actuality” and “autonomy” that often govern literary reception.

Babyficker is about the specific form of actuality of a literary text, an actuality whose force was felt in the scandal that followed Allemann’s reading of the text at the Bachmann Competition. But the ways in which the text itself presents this actuality have been ignored. In the sixteen years since Allemann read his text at the competition and the fifteen years since the text’s publication as a book, much more has been written about the “Allemann affair” than about the actual text of *Babyficker*.⁵ As Allemann remarks in an interview, *Babyficker* has “not really been taken notice of as a literary text” (Moser 418). I would like to direct attention to Allemann’s text and away from the political and media “pseudo-reception” (Maurach 2), which has effectively blocked the literary critical reception of *Babyficker*.⁶ But I have cited the reviews and interviews here because they point to some of the theoretical questions at stake in reading *Babyficker*: what is the actuality of a literary text? How does one conceive of the undeniably real force of the sentence at the center of Allemann’s text: “I fuck babies”?

I will address these questions after close readings of *Babyficker* and another Allemann text, but I would like to begin by citing an interview in which Allemann offers assistance in answering these questions by mentioning his affinity with Beckett: “The one who is narrating here has to force himself to say every sentence, sort of like Samuel Beckett’s characters” [*Der da erzählt, muß sich zu jedem Satz von neuem zwingen—wie etwa die Figuren Samuel Becketts*] (Löffler 102).⁷ The babyfucker, like all of Allemann’s figures, does indeed seem trapped in a zone, familiar to Beckett readers, that contains the promise of a beginning as well as the threat of total extinction. Every sentence could be his last, but it could also be the bridge to another kind of existence. Blanchot describes Beckett’s figures in similar terms and writes about their existence as a limit state. For Blanchot, Beckett “accepts beginning at that point where no continuation is possible” (*The Book to Come* 213). Blanchot goes on to describe this issueless existence as a point of origin:

We may be in the presence not of a book but rather something much more than a book: the pure approach of the impulse from which all books come, of that original point where the work is lost, which always ruins the work, which restores the endless pointlessness in it, but with which it must also maintain a relationship that is always beginning again, under the risk of being nothing. (*The Book to Come* 213)

This point is the moment of inception in which books can emerge or retreat, a moment full of potential but one that also threatens the writer with paralysis. For a writer, this means that, at the moment of beginning, the possibility of beginning is most at risk; it is the moment in which the work can be sensed as potential and thus also unrealized and potentially unrealizable. But the artist or writer must continually strive for this double experience of potency and impotency if he or she is to begin, which is why Blanchot writes, “if the artist did not surrender to the original experience which sets him apart. . . . —if he did not abandon himself to the boundlessness of error and to the shifting sands of infinitely repeated beginnings, the word *beginning* would be lost” (*The Space of Literature* 56).

The act of beginning, for Beckett and for Allemann, is always the act of repeating a beginning. Neither separated from actuality nor actual like a thing or psychological state, Allemann’s texts take place in a realm in which their narrators feel the impossibility of beginning even as they seem to be repeatedly pulled towards an inceptive event that would rip them out of their shadowy, threshold existence. His figures are nothing but a relation to a distant, merely hypothetical beginning. The skeletal, permutational, and contradictory outlines of the stories that his narrators tell barely distract them or us from their desperate, precarious state. With this understanding of beginning in mind, we can interpret Allemann’s desire for new realms of actuality as the exploration of the precariousness of every literary beginning. In a statement that Allemann felt “forced” to write in response to attacks on his work, he describes the babyfucker as “someone who has lost the certainty that he exists [and who] tries to catapult himself back into existence with an extreme sentence” [*einer, dem die Gewissheit abhanden gekommen ist, dass es ihn gibt, [und der] sich mit einem extremen Satz in die Existenz zurückzukatapultieren versucht*] (“Ist die Bachmann-Jury unfähig?”). Allemann’s polemological metaphor conveys the violence inherent in the attempt to begin, which appears at the center of all of his texts, not just *Babyfucker*.

The literary and theoretical interest of *Babyfucker* becomes clear

only when one takes account of Allemann's sustained engagement, throughout his prose texts, with the problems of potential and beginning. To understand *Babyficker* in the context of Allemann's oeuvre, I will examine the 1990 story "dozing maybe" [*dösend vielleicht*]. Then I turn to *Babyficker* to see how it presents these new "realms of actuality" that call into question the dichotomies that have determined its reception. At stake is an understanding of the actuality of a literary text.

Interruptive Inception in "dozing maybe"

The story "dozing maybe" opens Allemann's collection *Öz & Kco: Sieben fernmündliche Delirien* (*Öz & Kco: Seven Telephonic Deliria*). The text is narrated by a figure who emphasizes his lack of constancy: "Maybe I should take on a form," the dozing narrator suggests, "even though I've always been formless" [*Ich sollte vielleicht versuchen, Gestalt anzunehmen, obwohl ich seit jeher ein Gestaltloser bin*] (24). He also insists that he is "intentionless" and "incapable of decision" [*absichtslos und entscheidungsunfähig*]. We learn that he has been hacked up and sewn back together in a botched salvage operation: "They made a mistake, you made a mistake, we made a mistake. They threw away my torso, I'm left with my head, I'm left with my balls and prick, I'm left with words" [*sie haben einen Fehler gemacht, ihr habt einen Fehler gemacht, wir haben einen Fehler gemacht. Sie haben den Rumpf weggeschmissen, der Kopf ist mir geblieben, Sack und Schwanz sind mir geblieben, die Wörter sind mir geblieben*] (20). His reassembly was a mistake not because his torso was thrown away, but because he was saved at all. He thinks of himself as a waste product and assumed, at the time of his disassembly, that he would simply be discarded. In these sentences, it becomes clear that more than his body was on the chopping block: his ability to differentiate among the first, second, and third grammatical persons is also affected. In addition, his repair technicians failed to calculate the proper amount of blood for his new body:

I always thought that there wouldn't be enough blood for my balls and prick and head, but it's almost enough. . . . If all the blood went to my head, maybe I'd start to think or to tell you something; if all the blood went to my prick, maybe it would get itself up when you lift your skirt; if all the blood went to my balls, maybe I'd have an answer ready when someone asks again, who's coming next?

Ich habe immer gedacht, daß das Blut nicht ganz reichen würde für Sack und Schwanz und Kopf, aber es reicht fast. . . . Wenn alles Blut durch den

Kopf fließen würde, würde ich vielleicht anfangen nachzudenken oder dir etwas zu erzählen, wenn alles Blut durch den Schwanz fließen würde, würde er sich vielleicht aufrichten, wenn du den Rock hebst, wenn alles Blut durch den Sack fließen würde, hätte ich vielleicht eine Antwort parat, wenn wieder einer fragt, Wer kommt als nächster? (20–21)

In his current state, he is kept from beginning to narrate or think—and from saying who is coming next. Besides this question, the narrator's hesitation poses the question of who will emerge from this dozing self: what will his future, postinceptive form be? This question, too, remains unanswered. For now, he is just a dozing collection of body parts without the ability to narrate or copulate. The passage continues with a sentence that is exemplary for the text's dozing speech:

It's too far from one sentence to the next, it's impossible that I said that, maybe it's raining, maybe it's hailing, maybe it's snowing, maybe it's dry, there's no reason to believe that it's dry, there's no reason to believe that it's snowing, there's no reason not to believe it, it's enough, there's no reason to believe that, it's enough, who says it isn't hailing, who says it isn't raining, who says so, who says it isn't, there's no difference.

Von einem Satz zum nächsten ist es zu weit, es ist unmöglich, daß ich das gesagt habe, vielleicht regnet es, vielleicht hagelt es, vielleicht schneit es, vielleicht ist es trocken, es spricht nichts dafür, daß es trocken ist, es spricht nichts dafür, daß es schneit, es spricht nichts dagegen, es reicht, es spricht nichts dafür, es reicht, wer spricht dagegen, daß es hagelt, wer spricht dagegen, daß es regnet, wer spricht wofür, wer spricht wogegen, es ist kein Unterschied. (21)

In this passage and throughout “dozing maybe,” the narrator avoids sentence breaks because of the effort required to start again. His sentences prolong and sustain themselves by exhausting a series of permutations. He offers a series of possibilities and then takes them back. The passage shows how “dozing maybe” moves in unfruitful circles, unable to break out of a closed, anemic cycle.

His permutational speech pattern affects not only his meteorological statements but also more fundamental pronouncements about his principles and maxims. “To each his own waste products, that's always been my maxim, I've never had a maxim” [*Jedem das von ihm selbst Ausgeschiedene, ist immer meine Maxime gewesen, ich habe nie eine Maxime gehabt*] (16), he says, and he offers a variation three pages later: “To everyone the waste products of everyone, that's always been my principle, I've never had a principle” [*Allen das Ausgeschiedene aller, ist immer mein Grundsatz gewesen, ich habe nie einen Grundsatz gehabt*]

(19). This equivocation regarding his principles underscores the lack of certainty and grounding in this text—and even if he were to offer unequivocally this maxim or principle, it would give him only a scatological footing.

The narrator realizes that without principles his speech is nothing but a “swaying made out of words” [*Schaukeln aus Wörtern*], and it is only barely that, because the voice laments that “words turn from me,” a claim that he makes in the middle of a crucial passage that requires some introduction (19). This metatextual claim is embedded in something like a narrative, if that term can be used for a monologue spoken by an indecisive, intentionless, formless voice who explicitly states that he cannot narrate and whose every statement is immediately retracted or at least open to retraction. In the plot of this quasi-narrative, a feminine “you” has left this masculine “I,” but not before lifting up her skirt, which presages either his birth or their sexual union. The dozing voice repeatedly asserts that he is unborn and that she could give birth to him (17). Despite being unborn and not yet existing (“ich bin nicht da”), he has “invented” himself, her, and a male rival for her affection, and he makes free use of his power to name and rechristen, alternately calling her Rosa and Attalaht and him Harald and Henner (9). The narrator relates a constantly shifting, episodic story about these characters, and he intersperses this account with remarks about his dozing state. The claim that words turn away from him appears in a passage that mixes the narration of his relation to these characters with an attempt to arrive at an adequate description of his condition:

I’ve never been interested in prose, I’ve never been interested in Rose, I always thought that I would begin like this, poems, o yes, words, for example, words stand all around me, while I am lying down, and I just wish I didn’t wish, one of them would just bend down, words, they turn away from me, I turn over on my rear, and I just wish I didn’t wish that we would perish here, words, yeah right words, Rose said and pulled up her skirt, I would rather not have named you Attalaht, a ridiculous name. If I existed and Harald existed and if I had a knife, I’d want to thrust the knife into Harald’s stomach, the murderous desire of dozers.

Ich habe mich nie für Prosa interessiert, ich habe mich nie für Rosa interessiert, ich habe immer gedacht, daß ich so anfangen würde, Gedichte, o ja, die Wörter zum Beispiel, die Wörter stehen um mich herum, ich liege auf dem Rücken und wünsch mir nur, ich wünscht mir nicht, es tät sich eines bücken, die Wörter drehn sich weg von mir, ich dreh mich auf den Bauch und wünsch mir nur, ich wünscht mir nicht, sie stürben und ich

auch, die Wörter, von wegen die Wörter, sagte Rosa und hob den Rock hoch, ich hätte Lust, ich hätte dich nicht Attalaht genannt, ein alberner Name. Wenn es mich gäbe und wenn es Harald gäbe und wenn ich ein Messer hätte, hätte ich Lust, Harald das Messer in den Bauch zu stoßen, die Mordlust der Dösenden. (13)

I would like to focus on these sentences and how they associate forms of interruption and variation with inception, a connection that is essential to an understanding of the narrator's threshold state and his attempt to begin. His disinterest in prose can be understood in terms supplied by the etymology of prose as "forward-progressing discourse"; he is disinclined towards straight, linear writing, which can be seen in the second clause's revision of the word "prose" as "rose." The sentence turns back on itself and is thus an example of *correctio*, and the play "prose/rose" is an instance of paronomasia. These are figures that rely on repetition and variation; they double back and modify instead of advancing prosaically.

The passage continues by offering a commentary on paronomasia's possible role in the dozing voice's beginning to take on form, but this reflection is interrupted by the interjectory exclamation ("o ja!"). The term "poems" appears in an anacoluthon whose word order leads the reader to expect it to become an infinitive clause (maybe "Gedichte zu schreiben"). But this expectation is disappointed, and the sentence stops itself and starts over with the phrase "words, for example." At this point, the rhymes "Rücken/bücken" and "Bauch/auch" alert the reader to the fact that the narrator has begun to speak in verse. This may be how he always thought he would begin, but even this seemingly successful beginning is quickly aborted as he reverts to prose. And the poem was not exactly a good beginning: the speaker in the poem wishes for his death and the death of words.

The shift in genre, the exclamation, and the anacoluthon punctuate this relatively collected, if brief, consideration of how to begin, which contains the sole conjunction ("daß . . .") in this otherwise asyndetically coordinated series. The discussion of a possible beginning is not halted but, I would argue, continued and intensified by these instances of generic and rhetorical interruption. If he is to take on form and exist, it must be by means of a violent departure from his current state, and the *correctio*, *exclamatio*, anacoluthon, and eruption of poetry represent attempts to break out of his dozing state.

Nevertheless, the narrator is unable to begin: in the next sentence, he says, "if I existed" [*wenn es mich gäbe*]. He remains immobilized and separated not just from beginnings, but also from words; in the poem,

they surround him but turn away from him. He wishes that he did not want them to bend over. Since the words fail to bend down towards him, the voice wishes that he did not wish for their death, which he would share with them. In these ambivalent, retracted wishes for a (sexual?) relation or a common death, there is a desire to supplant distance and begin, and these violent thematic possibilities follow a number of rhetorical figures that attempt, similarly, to begin by interruption. This passage thematizes inception and employs figures of repetition that recommence, revise, and interrupt, and even at the lexical level the text varies and revises itself paronomastically.

The dozing voice's ambivalent desire appears with a great deal of pathos, which is visible in the exclamation and in the emphatic anaphora that structures this passage. The narrator attempts and fails to catapult himself into existence by means of figures like the exclamation, whose definition in Pierre Fontanier's *Les figures du discours* reads, "L'Exclamation a lieu lorsqu'on abandonne tout-à-coup le discours ordinaire pour se livrer aux élans impétueux d'un sentiment vif et subit de l'âme" (370). But the abandonment fails here, perhaps because the dozing voice lacks the necessary *élan* to which it could dedicate itself. An *exclamatio* is the expression of pathos, Quintilian tells us, but the pathos must be simulated in formal speech: "it is only those [exclamations] which are simulated and artfully designed which can with any certainty be regarded as 'figures'" (389). A sincere outburst of passion would be a loss of control on the orator's part, which is why the pathos of an exclamation must be false and deployed for effect (Groddeck, *Reden* 188). The artificiality of exclamatory outbursts in Allemann's texts is underscored by their inappropriateness. This sewn up, waffling, and murderous speaker does not seem the type to indulge in "o ja" exclamations. Nothing can be felt or thought unequivocally in his potential state; everything is marked by the "maybe" found in the story's title and throughout the text. The rhetorical pathos is false, but the simultaneity of the exclamation's pathos and its obvious artificiality corresponds to the voice's general tendency to offer and retract statements. The cry "o ja" is not followed here by its withdrawal, because it is already, in itself, split. Just as he wishes and does not wish, he feels and does not feel the pathos of the exclamation, and all this ambivalence must be understood in the context of his thwarted, violent desire to begin.

But the word "desire" is too strong here. The narrator is without goals and without intention even though he seems to gravitate towards his inception, which, however, he is unable to initiate. He feels that he

should look for Rose because she could give birth to him: "I should probably look for you, but I won't look for you, I've never looked for anything. Without intention and without form, it's impossible to start a search, good night" [*Vermutlich sollte ich dich suchen, aber ich werde dich nicht suchen, ich habe nie etwas gesucht. Es ist unmöglich, ohne Absicht, ohne Gestalt sich auf die Suche zu machen, gutnacht*] (9). His reflections are fixated on forms of origination: naming, renaming, and childbearing, and even his scatological interests can be read as infantile theories of birth (Freud 181). He must come passively into existence by receiving it from someone else, but he has yet to receive anything, which causes him to insist, "I've never been thankful to anyone for anything" [*ich bin nie irgendeinem für irgendetwas dankbar gewesen*] (12; 25). The text ends with a list of hypothetical acts for which he might be thankful, including being called an "idiot." This indicates that he would be thankful for just about anything that he receives, even insults, because any gift would establish his existence. The most developed articulation of potential gratitude occurs in the last two pages, in which he describes the many steps that Rosa/Attalaht would have to take to have sex with him. The text's concluding sentence relates a final, hypothetical post-coital scene in which he might be grateful: "Maybe if we fell asleep, maybe if we woke up, maybe if we heard how we, dozing maybe, maybe said good morning or good night" [*Vielleicht, wenn wir einschlafen würden, vielleicht, wenn wir aufwachen würden, vielleicht, wenn wir hören würden, wie wir, dösend vielleicht, vielleicht gutenmorgen sagen würden oder gutnacht*] (26). He would be thankful if they exchanged these simple greetings because then he would finally receive something—a greeting—and come into existence. His current dozing condition anticipates this exchange, but he cannot actively seek it out. Without intention, the dozing voice is nonetheless driven to find a way out of his current paralysis. When this compulsion is taken into consideration, the text of "dozing maybe" cannot be understood solely as an aimless "swaying made out of words." It circles around an absent center: the moment in which he could begin but which cannot be a goal for him.

Decision and intention are reserved for those who exist, and the dozing voice can only be open to inception without willing it and without searching out those who could help him begin. To what degree, though, is he really open to the possibility of beginning? On the one hand, this seems to be a hermetically sealed voice that repeats and varies a few basic propositions. He is a closed "system": "I am a system that, dozing, survives in no environment" [*Ich bin ein System, das sich in keiner Umwelt dösend erhält*]. There is perhaps no better figure

for this closure than his coprophagy, which he presents as “dozers’ melancholy” (16). His melancholy fails to mourn the existence that he does not yet have. He goes through the permutations of the elements available to him in his reduced state, and he often seems too focused on himself and his permutations to become anything else. In this way, “dozing maybe” is a seamless text, sewn together as tightly as this dozer’s monstrous body and closed off to any form of alterity. But, at the same time, there are signs of the narrator’s fragility or brokenness that may indicate openness to something else: to being insulted, to being born, to existence. These signs include his explicit calls to be insulted as well as the many paratactic gaps (the predominance of the asyndeton) and rhetorical interruptions (the instances of exclamations, *correctio*, and anacoluthon) that riddle his speech and emphasize that he is an assemblage with gaps that expose him, maybe, to a beginning.

Exclamatory Beginning in *Babyficker*

Published as a book in 1992, *Babyficker* is a continuation of the attempt in “dozing maybe” and the other six stories in the collection *Öz & Kco* to think about this moment of inception. It consists of a series of short prose sections narrated in first person by an unnamed narrator who, it seems, lives in a garret and whose contact with the outside world is limited to a woman named Linda, who looks through the window and tries to slide a letter through the mail slot. The first paragraph explains the title and is exemplary of the text’s style:

I fuck babies. Around my bed there are creels. They’re swarming with babies. They’re all here. Always have been. Always will be. Like me. I’m here too. For others it would probably be different. Others would leave. Would have come. Would go somewhere. Have come from somewhere. Not us. We’re here. The babies in their creels. Me in my bed. With closed eyes. Reach into the swarm. Fish one out. Fuck it. Throw it back to the others. All of them naked. All of them here. No names. At night everyone sleeps. Me. The babies. Linda. All is calm. During the day the babies get fucked. Always been that way. By me. Before going to sleep. After waking up. The babies here. Me here. Linda not here. All the lightless day long.

Ich ficke Babys. Um mein Bett stehn Zainen. Es wimmelt von Babys darin. Alle da. Seit jeher. Für immer. Wie ich. Auch ich bin da. Bei andern wärs anders vermutlich. Andere würden mal gehn. Wärn mal gekommen. Irgendwohin. Irgendwoher. Wir nicht. Wir sind da. Die Babys in ihren Zainen. Ich auf meinem Bett. Mit geschlossenen Augen. Greif ich ins

Gewimmel. Fisch mir eins. Ficks. Werfs zu den andern zurück. Alle nackt. Alle da. Keine Namen. Nachts wird geschlafen. Ich. Die Babys. Linda. Alles schläft. Am Tag werden Babys gefickt. Seit jeher. Von mir. Vorm einschlafen. Nach dem Erwachen. Die Babys da. Ich da. Linda nicht da. Den ganzen lichtlosen Tag lang. (7)

These choppy sentences outline the narrative's premise, which is then interspersed, as the text proceeds, with metatextual moments that call this premise into question. For instance, he declares that he has no sex organs and then that he does have them and that they are unlike any others: he has a "sex stone" that sometimes turns into a "sex puddle"; he imagines the babies growing to such a size that he would be suffocated by them; and he says, "I'm made of babies. They're made of me" [*Bin aus Babys. Sind aus mir*] (70). He also repeatedly interrupts himself to say, "I'm babbling" [*ich fasete*], and Martin Maurach notes that the "narrative is repeatedly called into question" by unmotivated interruptions such as "unproductive" [*unergiebig*] and "don't know what to do with [the character] Paul here" [*Weiß nicht was ich mit Paul anfangen soll*] (Maurach 3). These statements undercut the main premise of the story: that there is a man fucking babies.⁸ The text's final section consists of two isolated phrases: "Say nothing. Open wide" [*Sag nichts. Sperr den Mund auf*] (79). The text aims for this final moment in which the mouth says nothing but remains open, suspended right before the emergence of speech.

The book remains focused throughout on its opening sentence: "I fuck babies." The narrator repeatedly refers to it as "my sentence": "My sentence. It's what I have. It's what I am. I have to be dragged out of it" [*Mein Satz. Den hab ich. Der bin ich. Aus dem muß ich gezogen werden*] (17). The sentence has priority over its speaker, who may not understand it: "If I just once. A single time. Instead of incessantly saying my sentence. Would try. To imagine. What my sentence says" [*Wenn ich einmal. Ein einziges Mal. Statt immerzu meinen Satz zu sagen. Versuchen würde. Vorzustellen. Mir. Was mein Satz heißt*] (60). His insistence on the sentence being his is countered here by the claim that he does not understand it. He may be nothing but this sentence's uncomprehending vessel. Much like the voice in "dozing maybe" retracting its meteorological descriptions, the babyfucker retreats from his own claim on this, his sentence: "And what if it's a mistake. A mix-up. . . . Because someone somewhere put in the wrong tape for me" [*Wenn es ein Irrtum wär. Eine Verwechslung. . . . Weil irgendwo einer die falsche Kassette für mich eingelegt hat*] (55). But the sentence, even if it is not understood and not his sentence, structures the text as a

kind of refrain. In the parodic cogito cited above, *Babyficker* makes explicit the attempt to found an existence that is implicit in the narrator's formulations of maxims and principles in "dozing maybe." This parody is the point in the text that most strongly, formulaically reinforces Allemann's statement that the babyfucker is "someone who has lost the certainty that he exists [and who] tries to catapult himself back into existence with an extreme sentence."

The babyfucker describes his incessant returning to the sentence as inflation: "Inflate the sentence. Try to make it burst" [*Blas den Satz auf. Versuch ihn zum Platzen zu bringen*] (55). This is the text of *Babyficker*: the inflation of a single sentence. An inflated text in German as in English is characterized by the absence or poverty of content, just as an inflated person lacks interiority. "Inner emptiness" is one of the phrases that Grimms' dictionary uses to define the word ("Aufblasen," def. 2). The *Babyficker*—the text and its narrator—is only this sentence, inflated, and the scandalized reaction to it blew up the sentence even more by paying attention only to the narrator's sentence. As one critic put it, "the history of the reception of *Babyficker* is the memorable history of a 'one sentence story'" (Dean). But the sentence that sparked such an uproar may not even be contained in the text, Allemann notes in his response to the media reaction; his detractors have imagined, he notes, a sentence that the text does not contain: "The protesters seem to have read a text—one that I'm trying to imagine—that relays, by means of sentences like 'babyfucking is cool,' the message that babyfucking is cool" ("Ist die Bachmann-Jury unfähig?").

The narrator's intense focus on a few elements in "dozing maybe" becomes an exclusive attention to one sentence in *Babyficker*. But the narrator undoes his inflation of the sentence by returning again and again to another, deflating sentence: "I'm babbling." *Babyficker* is nothing but the inflation of a sentence and the deflation of the text as a delirious rambling, all in an attempt to begin.

This association of inflation and inception belongs to a noble literary tradition. Inflation is a literalization and parody of the breath of inspiration, which may be why it appears in such a prominent place in the prologue to the second volume of *Don Quijote*, as Cervantes offers simulated sympathy for Avellaneda, the author of the false continuation of the first volume of *Don Quijote*. In the prologue, Cervantes says that he understands "the devil's sly temptations, one of the worst of which is to make a man imagine himself capable of writing and publishing a book that will do as much for his reputation as for his pocketbook" (Cervantes 361), and as an analogy with the author of

the false *Quijote*, he relates the story of a madman who, surrounded by a crowd, inflates dogs by means of a reed pipe inserted “in the place you know,” as Ungaretti tactfully summarizes the act in an essay on Cervantes (Ungaretti 22). Cervantes concludes by quoting the madman talking to the crowd, “You think it’s easy, your graces, swelling up a dog like that?” (361). He then asks the reader, in his own voice, “Do you think it’s easy, your grace, making a book?” (361). Cervantes sets up an analogy between inflation and writing, and even his address to the reader mirrors the madman’s question. Only a few letters differentiate “hinchar un perro” from “hacer un libro” and thus madness, the inflated dog, and a bad copy from the true *Don Quijote*. But Cervantes insists on this difference. In *Babyficker*, the possibility of madness and the bad copy is not distanced as a negative example from which the text’s narrator differentiates himself, but is instead included in the text: this book *is* inflation.

Inflation could also be used to characterize the overblown, artificial pathos of the exclamation, which plays an even more important role in *Babyficker* than in other Allemann texts. Often it serves to emphasize an instance of *correctio*: “Makes me want to puke . . . O I won’t puke though” [Zum Kotzen. . . O ich kotz aber nicht] (11). “O I take that back,” he says (9). Exclamations occur most frequently in the form of an intensification of the undercutting of his speech: “O I’m babbling,” he declares no fewer than four times (34, 46, 58, 78).⁹ In these ways, the *exclamatio* serves the same purpose as in “dozing maybe,” in which it plays a role in the text’s doubling back on itself and in its self-interruption. But in *Babyficker*, the exclamation is pushed to new limits. In two instances, the “O” appears in isolation, as pure exclamation. The first instance comes after the narrator talks about selecting a baby: “To fuck it. To get better. To give it a beginning. A name” [*Ums zu ficken. Um zu genesen. Ihm einen Anfang zu geben. Einen Namen*] (44). He makes explicit the relation of fucking and beginning, but it would be the baby and not the fucker who would have a beginning here. The inceptive force of his act is projected onto the babies. This is the entirety of the following section: “Actual. More inactual. The most. O” [*Wirklich. Unwirklicher. Am aller. O*] (44). The paratactic series continues the attempt in the previous section to “give it a beginning” as it moves through the adjective’s base, comparative, and superlative forms, alternating between “actual” and “inactual” (or “real” and “unreal”) and eliding the final terms of the third and fourth elements. It is possible to hypothesize what these final terms would be. Following the logic of the series, the third element would

read “the most actual of all” [*Am allerwirklichsten*]. The fourth item in the series would have to be an intensification of “inactual” beyond the superlative: a *plus quam* superlative. The “O” stands in for this nonexistent element. The series alternates between actuality and inactuality until it reaches an impasse, at which point the exclamation pops up. It marks a limit, but a limit that the narrator wants to exceed, much as in “dozing maybe” the exclamation marks an attempt to begin.

There is one other instance in *Babyficker* when the exclamation “O” appears in isolation. The section relates how Linda gives the narrator a mirror so that he can verify his existence and see that he is like Linda and her lover Paul. As the narrator picks up the mirror, he is distracted by the sensation of the cool glass against his face and the feel of the wooden handle, and he never looks in the mirror. These are the section’s final sentences:

I don’t intend to look in the mirror. I don’t intend to fuck babies with the mirror’s wooden handle. Like an idiot. Paul’s bumhole. My bumhole. Linda’s bumhole. O. O. The baby bumholes.

Ich hab nicht die Absicht in den Spiegel zu blicken. Ich hab nicht die Absicht mit dem Holzgriff des Spiegels Babys zu ficken. Wie ein Idiot. Pauls Poloch. Mein Poloch. Lindas Poloch. O. O. Die Babypolöcher. (50)

The repeated “O” appears at the end of a series of holes and as the culmination of a deteriorating train of thought that moves from the mirror (which would have confirmed the fact and form of his existence) to a denied relation of the mirror to his sentence to, finally, one of the orifices that his sentence involves. The double “O” takes the place of a failed attempt to verify his existence. His thoughts drift to infantile orifices as he is unable to concentrate on other means of verifying his existence, and this sentence from the next section allows us to see a similarity with “dozing maybe”: “Tried to cry. Failed. Tried to fuck a baby” [*Versuchte zu weinen. Scheiterte. Versuchte ein Baby zu ficken*] (51). The babyfucker’s failed attempt to cry leads him here to try to fuck babies. The “O” cries in *Babyficker* are false because they represent a failed attempt to feel. They are proleptic expressions of a pathos that does not exist but that the speaker hopes to create. The next section continues the attempt to feel by self-mutilation:

Grabbed the hammer. Shattered my sex stone. Saw through my closed eyelid the splinters spray over the creels onto the garret wall. The garret walls. House walls. Out of stone. Didn’t feel anything. Didn’t sense anything.

Griff mir den Hammer. Zerschmetterte den Geschlechtsstein. Sah durchs heruntergeklappte Lid die Splitter über die Zainen weg an die Mansardenwand spritzen. Die Mansardenwände. Mansardenmauern. Aus Stein. Fühlte nichts. Spürte nichts. (51)

His babyfucking belongs to a series of these attempts to feel and thereby to be, and exclamations are a crucial part of these attempts. It marks a state that cannot be called actual or inactual. It attempts to go beyond these alternatives and beyond the question of whether he is babbling or speaking. The emphasis in *Babyficker* on this tension between origination and delirium also appears in its final sentences (“Say nothing. Open wide.”), which would bring about a gaping before speech that could turn into babbling or his sentence—or a completely different kind of speech. It comes at the end of the babyfucker’s rant, so it would not be a pure origin; instead it would be a moment of origination that emerges only after the constant shuffling between the inflation of his sentence and its deflation as mere babbling. Neither a true statement nor mere babbling, his open mouth and “O” point to language in a potential state and register Allemann’s attempt to write a text in which one can sense, in Blanchot’s terms, “the pure approach of the impulse from which all books come.”

But even as Blanchot insists that this origin is at the heart of every work, he also calls it “this point where nothing can succeed,” and, in the case of Beckett, he immediately rephrases the presentation of “the pure approach” and calls it “that original point where the work is lost, which always ruins the work, which restores the endless pointlessness in it” (*The Space of Literature* 55; *The Book to Come* 213). This simultaneity of ruination and origination marks every moment of the babyfucker’s discourse as split, just as it reduces Allemann’s presentation of emergence into a mere attempt at its presentation.

By focusing on moments of beginning, Allemann’s texts bear witness to the fact that the experience of an ability or potential is always also the experience of impotence. In a 1931 lecture course on Aristotle’s concept of *dunamis* (force), Heidegger uses the example of a sprinter to explain this duality, which only appears at first glance to be paradoxical. When we see a sprinter before the start, Heidegger writes, “what exhibits itself to us is not a human standing still, but rather a human poised for the start; the runner is poised in this way and is this utterly and totally. . . . The only thing needed is the call ‘go’” (Heidegger 187). In this moment, the runner is fully capable and ready for the gun, but the runner’s capability is no less actual if the gun does not go

off. To think about what it means for a capability to be actual—for a capability to be qua capability and not just in its enactment—requires that one also think of the runner’s capability in its potential not to pass into enactment. To be capable means always to be in a relation to non-enactment, to holding back, and to impotence.

The emphasis on this tension allows for a new approach to the question that has determined the reception of *Babyficker*: does he “really” fuck babies? Is this a story about a monster who fucks babies, or is this merely literature, an autonomous play with words? This creature possesses a specific type of actuality that is an allegory of the beginning of writing, that stage of creation in which the book may or may not be written. He is as actual as the experience of the possibility of an unwritten book, an unperformed but performable act; and Allemann’s text forces us to remain on this threshold and to explore the kind of existence that unfolds there around a single sentence that presents an act that may or may not be realized. Its emergence is, at most, as proleptic as the speaker’s pathos, but this prolepsis is no less disturbing or actual than any realized act; in fact, its potential nature may make it more threatening than a sentence spoken by a more fully realized speaker. A possible monster can always emerge and pose a threat while the actual monsters we read about have usually already been imprisoned.

The babyfucker’s paralysis and the possibility that he may just be babbling suspend but do not diminish the force of his sentence, and the discussion of the presentation of inception in *Babyficker* should not distract from the book’s incendiary content; it is allegorical, but not only allegorical. And a reading of this text must pose this question: why does Allemann’s interest in inception and possibility take the form of an extreme attention to and distraction from this particular sentence? One reviewer said that it would have been “more clever” and “more interesting from a literary point of view” to have written a text whose narrator’s sentence was “I fuck beer bottles” (“Kennt Kunst kein Tabu?” 46), and one of the jurors at the Bachmann Competition says in the discussion following Allemann’s reading that she “kept translating” the phrase “I fuck babies” into the metapoetic statements “I fuck words” and “I fuck letters.”¹⁰

But a reading of Allemann cannot simply remove the disturbing element at the center of the text; it must account for why his figure takes as his object babies and not beer bottles or letters. One obvious reason for the focus on babies is Allemann’s interest in emergence, in the infantile threshold on which language first comes into being.

But then why *babyfucking*? He may be interested in this act because of the juxtaposition of absolute domination and absolute submission that determines the pair baby/babyfucker. Just as the narrator moves back and forth between saying something and taking it back, insisting on his sentence and saying that it is nothing but drivel, the text's central sentence presents an act in which impotence and potency coincide. The narrator seems to be the potent one in his sentence, but the book posits the possibility that he, too, may be a baby. He moves back and forth: he is a babyfucker yet also made up of babies. And he might repeat this violent sentence in which he is the perpetrator so that his impotence might be overcome.

Allemann's interest in exploring new realms of actuality brings him to figures such as the babyfucker, who attempts "to catapult himself back into existence with an extreme sentence" ("Ist die Bachmann-Jury unfähig?"). This sentence is extreme not just because of what it says but also because of how it withdraws from what it says. The text is extreme because it attempts to maintain itself in a moment of emergence and because it attempts to register, thematically and rhetorically, the division that marks every beginning.

The narrator is only as real as his sentence, which might be able to throw him into existence, but for now the babyfucker remains suspended in this gray zone before enactment. Allemann's achievement lies in his ability to make this gray zone actual. The difficulty of presenting this zone's actuality explains the insistent equivocation and interruption in Allemann's texts, from the "I'm rambling" remarks to their use of *correctio*. The "O" presents the zero degree of this state, as well as the attempt to feel and thus escape from it. The "O" is an instance of the action described or demanded by the text's final two sentences: "Say nothing. Open wide." Like the dozing voice's desire to receive, it is the expression of a future pathos, and it is a hieroglyph for an open mouth and an orifice that offers the promise of a beginning even as it withholds from this promise every form of certainty.

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NOTES

- 1 I would like to thank Peter Smith for permission to cite from his forthcoming translation of *Babyficker*; all translations from *Babyficker* are his. All translations of other Allemann texts and his critics are mine.
- 2 See "Chronik," quoted in Moser 384.

- 3 The advertisement signed by Jörg Haider is reproduced in Polt-Heinzl (55); on the paint attack, see "Gewalt" 47.
- 4 Not all of the initial reviews followed this strict scheme; see, for example, Dean 59.
- 5 The best available accounts of the reaction to *Babyficker* can be found in Moser 386–421 and in Polt-Heinzl.
- 6 In one of the few literary critical engagements with Allemann's writing, Wolfram Groddeck notes that the combination of political outrage and literary critical silence after the Bachmann Competition amounts to "an unprecedented case of collective censorship" ("Die Form" 98). Groddeck identifies a central trait of Allemann's texts that may also be a reason for the lack of critical reactions to Allemann's writing: their "infantility," which pushes his texts beyond accepted borders of "disgust and morality" and often results in his texts' reliance on "sexual and fecal" vocabulary ("Die Form" 99).
- 7 In their attempts to come to terms with Allemann's prose, at least three critics, see Beckett as a predecessor, without appearing to know of Allemann's interview statement (cf. Drews, Dean, Maurach 3).
- 8 Even his sole contact with the outside world, Linda, is touched by the unreal. Her name may just be a variation on the "Lindenbaum" of Schubert's song; the narrator makes this association early on in the book: "Linda. A word that calls to mind wells trees songs graves" [*Linda. Ein Wort das an Brunnen Bäume Lieder Gräber erinnert*] (11). Or she may be nothing but a fragment taken from pop culture; according to the narrator, her lover's name is Paul, so the narrator's relation to them may be nothing more than a fan's relation to a pop star and his wife.
- 9 And on page 25, there is a variation: "I'm babbling. O it doesn't escape me that I'm beginning to babble" [*Ich fasete. O es entgeht mir nicht daß ich zu fasetn beginne*].
- 10 Marlis Gerhardt, quoted in Moser 387.

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