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JULIANE PRADE-WEISS

## Scarspeak

Thinking the Mother Tongue as a Formative Mark

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**ABSTRACT:** This chapter proposes the scar as a productive image to conceptualize the relation of speakers to the particular language otherwise called *mother tongue*, *native* or *first language*. Thinking of this relation in terms of a scar avoids the biopolitical implications of concepts derived from the context of family and birth that have, throughout the nineteenth and twentieth century, come to present language as basis of a nation state. The image of the scar also avoids the biographical normalization and linguistic hierarchization implied in the term *first language*, as both are equally important biopolitical strategies of forming individuals and communities. Thinking of the *mother tongue* in terms of a scar emphasizes the intensity of lasting formation and identification entailed by acquiring this particular language, and it highlights the violence inherent to these processes that tends to be covered up by the naturalizing and family-related imagery of *native* or *mother tongue* as well as by the favour implied in the term *first language*.

**KEYWORDS:** multilingualism; trauma; scar; lament; origin of language; language acquisition; Freud; Joyce; Veteran(y)

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## Scarspeak

### Thinking the Mother Tongue as a Formative Mark

JULIANE PRADE-WEISS

This chapter proposes the scar as a productive image to conceptualize the relation of speakers to the particular language that is otherwise called *mother tongue*, *native* or *first language*. Thinking of this relation in terms of a scar avoids the biopolitical implications of concepts derived from the context of family and birth that have, throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, come to present language as basis of a nation state. Furthermore, the image of the scar also avoids the biographical normalization and linguistic hierarchization that are implied in the term *first language*, as both are equally important biopolitical strategies of forming individuals and communities. Thinking of the *mother tongue* in terms of a scar emphasizes the intensity of lasting formation and identification entailed by acquiring this particular language, and it highlights the violence, inherent to these processes, that tends to be covered up by the naturalizing and family-related imagery of *native* or *mother tongue* as well as by the favour implied in the term *first language*. A mother tongue is neither a birthmark nor an open wound, rather, it is formed by intentional intervention into natural structures, and thus resembles scarification.

The chapter proceeds in four steps: First, it will outline more clearly why an alternative conceptualization of the mother tongue appears necessary; second, it will call attention to theoretical approaches

to language and language acquisition that allow for a conceptualization of the primary language as scar; third, it will specify the notion of the scar (explaining, not least, why this is not a trauma theory) with a short reference to Franz Kafka's 'Red Peter'; finally, it will read passages from two literary texts that portray the acquisition of the respective language they speak as a process of scarification: Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, and Aglaja Veteranyi's *Why the Child Is Cooking in the Polenta* (*Warum das Kind in der Polenta kocht*).

Reconceptualizing the relation of speakers to the language that seems to have shaped them most, that they identify with, and/or that they are identified by, appears necessary as the common terms *mother tongue* and *native* or *first language* have, throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, come to be used with the sociopolitical aim of forming homogenous nation states — which entails the further aims of forming monolingual speakers and distinguishing one national language and linguistic community from all other ones. Even in studies on multilingualism, it is everything but commonplace to presume that languages are not distinct and countable like apples, and that translanguaging is a fundamental feature of language rather than an exceptional trait of an author's biography. For acquiring a mother tongue means altering this language so that it is, in fact, not congruent with the mother's language. As Jakobson has shown, the phonetic variations of infantile language acquisition change a language's phonetic structure.<sup>1</sup> This model can be expanded to include lexical and grammatical changes children introduce to a language, so that individual language acquisition and overall historical language change appear as one process: Children do not merely accept and imitate the words they learn but, rather, form the language anew, and thereby change it. 'The child creates as [it] borrows', Jakobson notes.<sup>2</sup> By the time a child has acquired fluency in its mother tongue, this language is no longer the language of the child's mother or father, no longer the language the child had been taught. Therefore, a mother tongue always remains an 'other' tongue insofar as it comprises forms other than the familiar

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1 Roman Jakobson, *Child Language, Aphasia and Phonological Universals*, trans. by A. R. Keiler (The Hague: Mouton, 1968), pp. 13–18.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 14.

ones: unknown words, unheard pronunciations and expressions, as well as relations to other idioms in loan words or homonyms. Just as in a foreign language, there always remains a realm yet to be explored in the first language — which is, therefore, not one singular, homogeneous language, but a plurality of possible expressions, and hence a different tongue for every speaker. The notion of the homogeneity of a so-called natural language is thus a hypothesis that ignores basic structures of language but that is, still, unavoidable when using a dictionary. The structural character of the distinction between languages appears, paradoxically, as one of precise uncertainty: It is precise insofar as it can be exemplified with an indefinite number of words and phonetic, grammatical, semantic, or syntactic rules; yet the differentiation between languages remains uncertain because it cannot be abstracted from these examples as would be imperative for any other terminological distinction. Since the clear distinction between languages is a claim rather than an empirical observation, it keeps calling for decisive, violent acts that draw — or, rather, cut — dividing lines.

Developed with the idea of national languages, the notion of distinct, homogeneous languages still strives in what appears (in economical, ecological, and many political terms) rather as a post-nation state world. This pressure might even contribute to making the mother tongue a decisive cultural identifier and mark of social classification. The proposed notion of language acquisition as scarification, and of the mother tongue as a scar, seeks to reflect the violence inherent to the logic of identification as well as to education and formation.

Thinking of the forming and identificatory function of the primary idiom in terms of a scar means employing a metaphor, of course, but so does speaking of *mother, tongue, and native*. Speaking of a *first language* presupposes that there is a chronology of acquisition and/or an order of usage, while many structures of multilingualism provide parallelism and functional separation. What this shows, on a fundamental level, is that the relation to a system of symbolization can only be named in transferred terms, not 'as such', since it is only this very system that allows the employment of any terms. Therefore, every denotation will be misleading in some respects, not solely in English: the identificatory primary idiom may, as in classical Latin, be called 'father tongue', *sermo*

*patrius* or *lingua patria*,<sup>3</sup> which is the tongue that comes with the (per se) paternal heritage and the ‘homeland’ (*patria*) — yet this language is not necessarily learned from the father. Alternatively, it can be called mother tongue, a term to which Latin shifted in the wake of Christianization<sup>4</sup> — still, it is not inevitably the mother’s first language or taught by the mother. In Russian, it can be called ‘native tongue’ (*rodnoj jazyk*), the language associated with birth and ‘origin’ (*rody*) as if it was the language one is born to speak — when it is not necessarily the (sole) language native to the place where one is born and where the language is learned. Even the biographical approach of defining a first language leaves room for doubt. In his autobiography, Nabokov — usually considered a native speaker of Russian — insists that when he was six years old, ‘my brother and I could read and write English but not Russian (except the words *КАКАО* and *МАМА*).’<sup>5</sup> The term *first language* does not solve all the complications evoked by the attempt to distinguish one primary and principal language from others, but opens up more questions: Is it the chronologically first language or the one primarily used? In speaking or in writing? And in writing what: texts for publication or just any scribbling? The more precisely the difference between the mother tongue and other languages is to be defined, the more this distinction appears to disperse.

The notion of the scar reflects the formative and identificatory function of the primary idiom — not in contrast to other languages (as the term *first language* does), but as an experience of the individual (instead of taking the point of view of those passing it on, as in *mother tongue* or *lingua patria*), and as a process involving uncontrollable (mental, emotional, etc.) as well as controllable (cultural, social, etc.) factors (instead of viewing language as a given, as the terms *native* suggests).

Numerous theoretical approaches to language allow for a conceptualization of the primary language as scar insofar as they highlight

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3 Horace, *Ars Poetica*, in *Epistles Book 11 and Epistle to the Pisones ('Ars Poetica')*, trans. by Niall Rudd (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 58–74 (57); Ovid, *Tristia*, ed. by John Barrie Hall (Stuttgart: Teubner, 1995), 4.4.5.

4 Leo Spitzer, ‘Muttersprache und Muttererziehung’, in *Essays in Historical Semantics* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1948), pp. 15–65.

5 Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited* (New York: Putnam’s, 1966), p. 28.

the violence inherent in both language acquisition and symbolic substitution. The formative violence of language features prominently in approaches that apply a strategy popular at least since the eighteenth century, which conceptualizes structures of language by way of imagining a scenario of the origin of language (an approach still popular with evolutionary models of language development). Language, several such scenarios suggest, originates in a traumatizing strike that leaves a formative mark.

In his groundbreaking text, *The New Science*, Vico pictures language as a means for responding to overwhelming experiences of nature. The first word and thus language arose when ‘the sky fearfully rolled with thunder and flashed with lightning’ (il Cielo [...] folgorò, tuonò con folgori, e tuoni spaventosissimi).<sup>6</sup> The ‘beastlike pre-humans’ (*bestioni*), Vico explains, took these strikes, parallel to their own inarticulate utterances, as expressions of a superior being who ‘was attempting to tell them something.’<sup>7</sup> Their response, and first word, is a name: in Latin *Ious* (as in Jove) after the crashing of thunder, or in Greek *σίς* (as in Zeus) after the hiss of lightning, or in Hebrew *Ur* after the burning fire.<sup>8</sup> Vico’s classical preference for Greek and Latin, and, to some extent, Hebrew as original languages notwithstanding,<sup>9</sup> Vico’s multilingual primal scene of language corresponds to what Cathy Caruth calls the conventional definition of trauma:

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6 Giambattista Vico, *The New Science*, trans. from the 3rd edn by Thomas Goddard Bergin and Max Harold Fisch (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1948); Giambattista Vico, *Principi di scienza nuova*, 3rd edn, 2 vols (Naples: Stamperia Muziana, 1744), II, p. 377.

7 Vico, *Principi di scienza nuova*, II, p. 377; my translation.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 447. This passage appears as a ‘scientific’ re-rendering of the Israelites’ fear at the theophany at Mount Sinai, when God dictates the Ten Commandments, in Exodus 20. 18–19: ‘When all the people witnessed the thunder and lightning, the sound of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking, they were afraid and trembled and stood at a distance, and said to Moses, “You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, or we will die.”’ See *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha*, ed. by Michael Coogan, 5th edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018). I thank Dominik Markl for making me aware of this background.

9 Others favour Hebrew, such as the influential Dante Alighieri, *De vulgari eloquentia*, trans. by Steven Botterill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. vi.

the response to an unexpected or overwhelming violent event or events that are not fully grasped as they occur, but return later in repeated flashbacks, nightmares, and other repetitive phenomena.<sup>10</sup>

Hardly any phenomenon is as repetitive as language. Even more important than repetition, however, is the role of the strike in Vico's account: The names imitate the sounds of thunderstorm, yet the origin of language is not onomatopoeia. The first word is a reproduction of a deafening crash that also 'flashes' and 'dazzles' (*folgolare* means both) — which is to say that rather than arising from a particular perception of the senses, the first word arises from a defeat of perception. The crash causes a rupture in the continuum of sensual perception that permits abstraction, projection, and imitation, which is impossible without a rupture between original and copy. Crucial to conceptualizing language acquisition as scarification is Vico's apotropaic notion of language: originating in an overwhelming attack on the senses, and thus incomprehensible, speech appears as a means for averting the fear of destruction by a superior force and, at the same time, for accepting the shock as an authority's call, and answering it. The original shock, however, evades full comprehension as it precedes, and installs, language as a means for comprehension. The language thus formed testifies to the original strike, it still carries a rupture between signifier and signified; any linguistic representation necessarily differs from the entity it refers to, just as the first words differ profoundly from the thunderstorm they respond to and imitate.

Condillac, Rousseau, and Herder imagine similar origins of language: for each of them, language originates in averting the fear of being overcome. Condillac pictures the origin of language in 'cries' (*cris*) of two infants abandoned in the desert: First, they use these 'natural signs' (*signes naturels*) in order to soothe the passions aroused by their needs, later they use these 'natural cries' (*cris naturels*) as models for the 'arbitrary signs' (*signes arbitraires*) of a new language.<sup>11</sup> Adopting the idea

10 Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), p. 91.

11 Etienne Bonnot de Condillac, *Essai sur l'origine des connoissances humaines*, in *Œuvres philosophiques de Condillac*, ed. by Georges Le Roy, 3 vols (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1947–51), I (1947), pp. 1–118 (pp. 60–61).

of an original 'cry of nature' (*cri de la Nature*),<sup>12</sup> Rousseau points out what Condillac's scenario implies: an articulate language of arbitrary signs appears hardly necessary in the communication between mother and child, especially given that the infant has more to point out to the mother than she might have to say,<sup>13</sup> so that the pedagogical relation implied in the term *mother tongue* appears questionable.<sup>14</sup> For Rousseau, symbolic substitution, rather, originates from a Vico-like encounter of 'a primitive man' (*un homme sauvage*) with unknown others, first taken to be, and thus called, 'giants' (*géans*), but later comprehended to be equals.<sup>15</sup> Arising from an original error, language according to Rousseau is, as Derrida outlines,<sup>16</sup> an original prosthesis that, as de Man has shown,<sup>17</sup> hardly permits a profound distinction between proper and transferred sense. Thinking of the primary idiom as a scar connects to this assumption of a profound metaphoricity of language. In Rousseau, the founding error results from fear, which makes man see other men as larger and stronger than himself.<sup>18</sup> Hence in Rousseau as in Vico, language arises, as an apotropaic means, from the fear of being overcome and defeated. Herder adopts this notion and locates the first origin of language in every animal's expression of pain. Reflection and symbolic substitutes have a different origin, yet the primary purpose of language, according to Herder, is overcoming the panic of being overcome by the world, and making room to breathe by means of a cry.<sup>19</sup>

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12 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discours sur l'origine et les fondements de l'inégalité parmi les hommes*, in *Œuvres complètes*, 5 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1959–95), III (1964), pp. 111–223 (p. 148).

13 *Ibid.*, pp. 146–47.

14 On Rousseau's exclusion of the mother from the discourses on the mother tongue, see Anne Berger, 'The Popularity of Language: Rousseau and the Mother-Tongue', in *The Politics of Deconstruction: Jacques Derrida and the Other of Philosophy*, ed. by Martin McQuillan (London: Pluto, 2007), pp. 98–115.

15 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, 'Essai sur l'origine des langues', in *Œuvres complètes*, v (1995), pp. 371–429 (p. 381).

16 Jacques Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other; or, The Prosthesis of Origin*, trans. by Patrick Mensah (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998).

17 Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1979), pp. 135–59.

18 Rousseau, 'Essai', p. 381: 'Sa frayeur lui aura fait voir ces hommes plus grands et plus forts que lui-même.'

19 Johann Gottfried Herder, *Treatise on the Origin of Language*, in *Philosophical Writings*, trans. by Michael N. Forster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 65–164 (pp. 65–66).



Fear, it should be noted, is both a key factor in directing these primal scenes and a driving force for the systematic exclusion of women from the origin(s) of languages. The reduction of the female to an allegorical, inarticulate 'Nature', as in Rousseau and Herder,<sup>20</sup> appears as an overdetermined flipside of the subsequent Romantic reliance solely on the mother to build the mother tongue as a both natural and cultural basis of the nation state (in which she has no say).<sup>21</sup>

In Modern thought, more conventional than an apotropaic concept of language is, of course, the notion of language as a means for marking and appropriating objects, as for instance Smith's account of the first formation of languages depicts it.<sup>22</sup> Walter Benjamin, however, comes back to thinking origin as a structural rather than historical concept in his discussion of the primal scene of language depicted in the biblical book of Genesis,<sup>23</sup> and so does Gershom Scholem, who seeks to continue Benjamin's essay on language with the short text 'On Lament and Lamentation', an epilogue to his translation of the biblical book of Lamentations, or *Eikha* in the Hebrew Bible.<sup>24</sup> The five songs of lamentation, Scholem says, only raise their voice in order to fall back to silence, because the movement of falling silent is the adequate way of tonguing mourning — the state of refuting any symbolic substitution for what is absent, or lost.<sup>25</sup> Reading Benjamin and Scholem, Agata Bielik-Robson schematizes two notions of language that differ profoundly in how they deal with the trauma that originates symbolic substitution. She labels them, for the sake of brevity, as Greek *logos* on the one hand, and Hebrew *kinah* (lament) on the other. 'Logos', Bielik-Robson explains, 'protects itself against its traumatic origins by producing a plethora of meaning that immediately repairs the broken

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20 For Rousseau, see note 14; Herder, *Treatise on the Origin of Language*, pp. 68–69.

21 Friedrich Kittler, *Discourse Networks 1800/1900*, trans. by Michael Metteer with Chris Cullens (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990), pp. 25–69.

22 Adam Smith, 'Consideration Concerning the First Formation of Languages', in *Works*, 5 vols (London: Cadell & Davies, 1811), v, pp. 3–48 (pp. 3–4).

23 Walter Benjamin, 'On Language as Such and on the Language of Man', in *Selected Writings*, ed. by Michael W. Jennings and others, 4 vols (Cambridge: Belknap, 2004–06), 1 (2004), pp. 62–74; with reference to Genesis 2. 19–20.

24 Gershom Scholem, 'On Lament and Lamentation', trans. by Lina Barouch and Paula Schwebel, *Jewish Studies Quarterly*, 21 (2014), pp. 1–12 (p. 5).

25 *Ibid.*, pp. 7–9.

world — while *kinah* [...] delays the moment of sense-bestowing.<sup>26</sup> Language can be a reparation for damage, a rather Smithsonian notion, but just as well a means for perpetuating and conveying damage. The point is not to decide between the two, but to see the less reassuring notion of a remaining damage as complementing the commonplace view of symbolic substitution in terms of reparation and compensation. The notion of the scar embraces both aspects, the restoration by way of symbolic substitution as well as the remaining traits of damage.

Individual language acquisition — rather than a speculative common origin — has become the prominent scene for the study of the general structure of language in the twentieth century. The original traumatizing strike that necessitates, installs, and shapes language is to be found in the ontogenetic primal scene of speech and symbolization, too. An example that might seem unusual in this context still serves well to illustrate the structural point. Freud's case history of the so-called 'Wolf Man' hints at a traumatic notion of the acquisition of the primary idiom: the patient consults Freud because the world seems veiled to him unless, all too rarely, he is relieved of his intestinal contents.<sup>27</sup> Freud finds this complaint — both the symptom and the wording — to be an adaptation of the patient's mother's complaints about a different condition, expressing and at the same time suppressing the infantile wish to replace her in the intercourse with his father,<sup>28</sup> and thus to overcome the father's preference for the patient's late sister, whom the grown up patient cannot mourn.<sup>29</sup> Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok's reanalysis of the case expounds a translation not only of a primal scene to dreams and symptoms, but also of a nanny's complaint about child abuse from (the nanny's) English to (the mother's) Russian to (the analyst's) German, and of the mother's denial of the

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26 Agata Bielik-Robson, 'The Unfallen Silence: *Kinah* and the Other Origin of Language', in *Lament in Jewish Thought: Philosophical, Theological, and Literary Perspectives*, ed. by Ilit Ferber and Paula Schwebel (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014), pp. 133–52 (p. 135).

27 Sigmund Freud, 'From the History of an Infantile Neurosis', in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*, trans. by James Strachey and others, 24 vols (London: Hogarth, 1953–1974), xvii (1973), pp. 1–124 (pp. 74–75). Freud calls the patient 'Wolf Man' in 'Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety', in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*, xx (1973), pp. 75–176 (p. 105).

28 Sigmund Freud, 'Neurosis', pp. 76–101.

29 *Ibid.*, pp. 21–23.

charge.<sup>30</sup> The report of the seminal wolf dream might thus be based on an echo of the English words *witness*, and *son*,<sup>31</sup> in the Russian *vidietz son* (ВИДЕТЬ СОН), literally 'seeing a dream.'<sup>32</sup> The 'Wolf Man's' patho-logical mother tongue, however, is none of these natural languages but rather the idiom of complaints learnt from his mother, with the key phrase claiming, announcing, and lamenting that one 'cannot go on living like this.'<sup>33</sup> Just as his mother speaks several languages, the 'Wolf Man's' mother tongue of complaints can be articulated in different natural languages (even Latin and French).<sup>34</sup> It is, however, not a language to lament over others or to connect and communicate with others, but a medium to demean oneself, to replace oneself with others, and thus to restage the traumatic primal scene. The scene's specific character remains forever unknowable as it exceeded the infant's comprehension. Therefore, it remains a shapeless wound within his psyche that starts to organize his wishing and thinking as soon as he acquires speech, the means for comprehension. Crucial, here, is that what is transmitted from the mother to the son is neither the cause nor the referent of the ceaseless complaints (these differ), but a symbolic organization that allows one to deal with the wound.

In the case history of the 'wolf man', language marks an individual trauma, but the mother tongue of complaining is also acquired as a transgenerational trauma. And transgenerational tradition is indispensable to any notion of language. Yet while the view of language as a cultural asset and identifying possession is a phantasm, and while, furthermore, the concept of trauma may seem to fit well a reflection of the formative and identificatory violence linked to the primary idiom, simply arguing for a general link of language to trauma is too easy for a topic this serious. Transgenerational traumata are mostly marked by speechlessness, and although the 'wolf man's' mother tongue of complaining enables him to deal with his trauma, this *dealing* cannot at all be called *coping*, since he remains seriously sick and dysfunctional, as

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30 Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, *The Wolf Man's Magic Word: A Cryptonymy*, trans. by Nicolas T. Rand (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).

31 Freud, 'Neurosis', pp. 28–29.

32 Abraham and Torok, *The Wolf Man's Magic Word*, p. 110.

33 Freud, 'Neurosis', p. 76.

34 *Ibid.*, p. 39.

Freud notes.<sup>35</sup> *Scar* seems to be a more appropriate term than trauma for grasping the formative and identifying dynamics of the first idiom as outlined by Vico and others. Before reading texts that portray the acquisition of a mother tongue as lasting scarification, it is necessary to specify the notion of the scar.

Medicine views scar tissue as ‘of inferior functional quality’ compared to other skin.<sup>36</sup> This secondary quality represents, on the one hand, the limitation of the notion of the primary idiom as a scar, for we cannot know, or even ask, what communicative structure there would be without articulate language. On the other hand, inferior supplementarity — be it compared to a hypothetical natural expression, or to mere presence — is the canonical resentment against symbolic substitution in general and written language in particular.<sup>37</sup> And scars are, indeed, not solely somatic phenomena, but have ‘medical, psychological, social, political [and] moral aspects’, too.<sup>38</sup> Etymology makes this apparent: The ancient Greek ἐσχάρα (*eschara*), literally ‘fireplace’,<sup>39</sup> denotes the ‘trace of a healed wound, sore, or burn’,<sup>40</sup> such as the brand used to mark slaves.<sup>41</sup> Intentional scarification is often used as an identifying mark, be it with the aim of inclusion and decoration, signifying maturity and capability, such as duelling scars, or be it with the aim of exclusion and stigmatization,<sup>42</sup> which testify, for instance, to the torture of being whipped in slavery.<sup>43</sup>

35 Ibid., p. 6: Freud describes him as ‘entirely incapacitated and completely dependent upon other people when he began his psycho-analytic treatment’.

36 N. L. Occlestone and others, ‘The Discovery and Development of New Therapeutic Treatments for the Improvement of Scarring’, in *Advanced Wound Repair Therapies*, ed. by David Farrar (Oxford: Woodhead Publishing, 2011), pp. 112–29 (p. 112).

37 Plato, *Phaedrus*, in Plato, *Lysis. Symposium. Phaedrus*, ed. and trans. by Chris Emlyn-Jones and William Preddy (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2022), pp. 344–531 (274c–d).

38 Dagmar Burkhart, ‘Narbe: Archäologie eines literarischen Motivs’, *arcadia*, 40.1 (2005), pp. 30–60 (p. 30).

39 *A Greek-English Lexicon*, ed. by Henry G. Liddell and Robert Scott, 9th edn (Oxford: Clarendon, 1961), p. 699.

40 Scar, n. 2, in *OED Online* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020) <<https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/171985>> [accessed 13 June 2017].

41 Burkhart, ‘Narbe’, p. 34. Hence Odysseus’s scar is called differently. Homer, *The Odyssey with an English Translation* by A. T. Murray, 2 vols (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1919, II, 19. 391–93).

42 Burkhart, ‘Narbe’, p. 49.

43 Jennifer Putzi, *Identifying Marks: Race, Gender, and the Marked Body in Nineteenth Century America* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2006), pp. 102–09; Susan

A scar is thus as much a somatic phenomenon, most notably of the skin, as a cultural one. It is what Turner calls 'the social skin'.<sup>44</sup> For no matter whether it was caused intentionally or accidentally, and regardless of its particular appearance, every scar can be read as an indexical sign referring to a cause. Moreover, as Burkhart points out, scars are a phenomenon of chronemics, that is, of the semiotics of time: in their retrospective aspect, scars refer back to a wound and strike, while in their prospective aspect, they refer to the course of (further) healing.<sup>45</sup> These two temporal aspects are crucial to the narrative of Odysseus's scar.<sup>46</sup> Testifying to an episode from Odysseus's childhood, the scar identifies the guest in the house of Ithaca as the 'changeful', 'much-wandered', πολύτροπος (*polytropos*) head that had left it.<sup>47</sup> The narrative reminisces, among other things, about how one sang to the wound to promote its healing.<sup>48</sup> Being read and revealed, the scar forebodes the end of the suitors waiting for Penelope to choose one among them. Both temporal aspects are crucial to thinking the primary idiom in terms of the scar: the retrospection onto an original strike, or shock, as well as the outlook for healing. The mother tongue is taught with the intention of training future speakers, and once the language is acquired, it is a means for speaking of this formation, and for being identified with reference to it. Kafka's 'A Report to an Academy' expounds the violence inherent to the formative and identifying processes of language acquisition.

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Corey, 'Toward the Limits of Mystery: The Grotesque in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*', in *The Aesthetics of Toni Morrison: Speaking the Unspeakable*, ed. by Marc C. Conner (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2000), pp. 31–48 (pp. 34–36).

44 Terence T. Turner, 'The Social Skin', in *Not Work Alone: A Cross-Cultural View of Activities Superfluous to Survival*, ed. by Jeremy Cherfas and Roger Lewin (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1980), pp. 112–40.

45 Burkhart, 'Narbe', p. 35.

46 Homer, *Odyssey*, xix. 390–92. Terence Cave, in *Recognitions: A Study in Poetics* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1988), p. 23, is right to insist that only the narrative makes the scar a signifier: 'the scar, then, is more than a sign by which Odysseus is recognized. It composes his identity by calling up retrospectively a fragment of narrative, since only narrative can compose identity as continuity once a severance has occurred, and the scar here may well look like a sign of the wound, the hiatus, the severance constituted by Odysseus' wanderings.'

47 Homer, *Odyssey*, i. 1.

48 *Ibid.*, xix. 457.

Requested to give an account of ‘the life [he] formerly led as an ape’,<sup>49</sup> Red Peter tells of how he came to be able to speak. He received two shots: one ‘left a red scar’ on his cheek, earning him his name; the other shot hit him ‘below the hip’, left him limping,<sup>50</sup> and is as important as the first one for his introduction to human language:

I read an article recently by one of the ten thousand windbags who vent themselves concerning me in the newspapers, saying: my ape nature is not quite under control; the proof being that when visitors come to see me, I have a predilection for taking down my trousers to show them where the shot went in. The hand which wrote that should have its fingers shot away one by one. As for me, I can take my trousers down before anyone if I like; you would find nothing but a well-grown fur and the scar made — let me be particular in the choice of a word for this particular purpose, to avoid misunderstanding — the scar made by a wanton shot. Everything is open and aboveboard; there is nothing to conceal.<sup>51</sup>

For Red Peter, Walter Sokel remarks, ‘identity is performance. It is not a static essence, a given, but a constantly reenacted self-presentation.’<sup>52</sup> There is nothing ape-like about this insight, as the parallel narrative of Odysseus’s scar makes clear. Each is identified by the representation of his past. Yet while Odysseus can rely on an authoritative narrator to make sure ‘everything is visible’, as Auerbach says,<sup>53</sup> Red Peter has to tell the story of his formative scar himself. Yet what the scar testifies to is the absolute abandonment of his life as an ape, which he can remember as little as humans are able to recall their infancy. What Red Peter performs is, thus, language as a scar: As if to disprove the scar in his face, he puts the place of the second shot on display, where there is no scarlet mark, but fur and a healed wound. This scar is crucial to his self-performance because it is as secondary as

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49 Franz Kafka, ‘A Report to an Academy’, in *Complete Stories*, trans. by Willa Muir and Edwin Muir, ed. by Nahum N. Glatzer (New York: Schocken, 1971), pp. 250–67 (p. 250).

50 *Ibid.*, p. 251.

51 *Ibid.*, pp. 251–52.

52 Walter Herbert Sokel, *The Myth of the Power and the Self: Essays on Franz Kafka* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2002), p. 283.

53 Erich Auerbach, ‘Odysseus’ Scar’, in *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. by Willard R. Trusk (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), pp. 3–23 (p. 3).

scar tissue: Testifying to the second shot that hindered him from running, the mark below the hip is not free for everyone to see, but subject to willing exposure by Red Peter, who let go of the animal fur in favour of the human concept of nakedness without clothing. The exposure of the second scar, and its narrative, explain the facial mark, and all these elements together identify him. Yet even as it is retrospective in gesturing back towards the shots leading to captivity, Red Peter's identifying performance is also prospective: The violence of the original blows is perpetuated when he tells of how language was his way out of panic and fear of death. 'The ape's name', Carolin Duttlinger writes, 'is itself a kind of scar, a reminder of the violence which catapulted him out of his animal existence into the world of language' as 'he did not choose his own name', but was named by his captors.<sup>54</sup> The violence of being given a name before being able to have a say in it, and thus being marked for life, however, is what Red Peter has in common with most name-bearers. And he also shares the narrative use of language in response to the imperative to claim an identity. Although an unusual speaker, Red Peter's experience of being forced into language, and submitted to symbolic substitution, is perfectly ordinary. The common scarification of language acquisition is put on display by the uncommon details of his story. Language is a scar for Red Peter because symbolic substitution by way of arbitrary signs did away with any original inviolacy so profoundly that it cannot be recalled, and thus has to be reconstructed endlessly. 'The human straightjacket', Paul North writes, 'in which he is already pinned when the story begins may as well have always been his.'<sup>55</sup> In order to prove that he has stopped being an ape, and to be himself, he has to display the scar and language, which are the reasons why he cannot know what being an ape is like. Speech and scars are concomitant for Red Peter — they are aspects of one phenomenon, hence his aggressive insistence on not being silenced and on displaying his scar.

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54 Carolin Duttlinger, *The Cambridge Introduction to Franz Kafka* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 78.

55 Paul North, *The Yield: Kafka's Atheological Reformation* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015), p. 222.

Words and wounds, as Geoffrey Hartman alliterates,<sup>56</sup> maintain a relation well scrutinized in criticism, concluding: ‘where there is a word cure, there must be a word-wound.’<sup>57</sup> The paradigm of such readings is, more often than not, the talking trauma as outlined by Caruth: ‘the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available.’<sup>58</sup> Scarification is rarely taken into account, even though it is the regular prospect of wounds. To be sure, an open wound may seem more evocative of a talking mouth than of a closed wound. The disregard of the scar in the critical imagery of trauma is still surprising, given that trauma studies have shifted their focus from the causes to the aftermath of traumatization, as Hartman notes. Scars come in the aftermath of wounds. And the regard for scarification is all the more necessary as the shift of attention to the aftermath often results in an unsettling ‘structural equivalence’ of individual and communal traumata, which may have very different causes, as Hartman continues: a careless word or even an intentional insult evokes, and permits, other reactions than war and genocide.<sup>59</sup> Thinking of the mother tongue, and of language acquisition, in terms of a scar or scarification seeks to avoid such uneasy equivalence while still reflecting the violence inherent to the processes of formation and identification. Thus, the notion of the scar seeks to balance in between the simplistic extremes of, on the one hand, a generalization of the concept of trauma so that it embraces every kind of shock, and, on the other hand, a celebratory emphasis on healing that integrates even events of psychic destruction into a developmental narrative of ‘experience’. Suffice it to say that while, somatically, scars are closed wounds, semantically, these closures are often regarded as grotesque, that is, as permeating the boundary between corporeal inside and outside in a way that Bakhtin has conceptualized as carnivalesque.<sup>60</sup> Scarification

56 Geoffrey H. Hartman, ‘Words and Wounds’, in *Saving the Text: Literature/Derrida/Philosophy* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press 1981), pp. 118–67.

57 *Ibid.*, p. 123.

58 Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, p. 4.

59 Geoffrey H. Hartman, ‘Wörter und Wunden, bei Wordsworth und Goethe’, in *Grenzwerte des Ästhetischen*, ed. by Robert Stockhammer (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2002), pp. 164–85 (pp. 165–66); my translation.

60 Burkhart, ‘Narbe’, pp. 31–32; Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, trans. by Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), pp. 303–67.



allows for survival, yet with their readability scars put the individual on display, so that the marks prolong the violence of the original strike into the future. Besides the initial infliction of the logic of symbolic substitution, the lasting inclusion into a particular cultural, social, historical (national, religious, etc.) discourse, and the identification with reference to that discourse, there comes with language acquisition an eminent, both scaring and scarring, violence. This violence may be addressed through accounts of language acquisition provided by Joyce and Veteranyi.

The first section of Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* portrays the 'features of infancy' commonly omitted in portraits, as Joyce notes elsewhere.<sup>61</sup> What is at stake is the infancy not of a particular speaker, but of language. The first stage of language acquisition is an onomatopoetic encounter with a 'moocow' in a tale of the father, explicating the claim of words — such as 'cow' — to refer to something that sounds utterly different — more like 'moo'.<sup>62</sup> While this tale serves as a gentle introduction to the structure of reference and arbitrary signs, the second stage of language acquisition outlines how symbolic substitution works, and it is rather traumatic. In one act, the child is given a name and threatened with being silenced:

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.

61 James Joyce, 'A Portrait of the Artist', in *The Workshop of Daedalus: James Joyce and the Raw Materials for 'A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man'*, ed. by Robert E. Scholes and Richard M. Kain (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1965), pp. 60–68 (p. 60).

62 James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, ed. by Jeri Johnson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 5: '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.'

Apologise,  
 Pull out his eyes,  
 Pull out his eyes,  
 Apologise.<sup>63</sup>

The mother's imperative 'Stephen will apologise' evokes Stephen in order to accuse him of owing an apology without explaining what he is guilty of. The child is thus baptized by the order to apologize, and it might be no coincidence that *Stephen* is the name of the first Christian martyr.<sup>64</sup> The threat following the mother's order varies a line from the biblical 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.'<sup>65</sup> The obedient child, this is to say, follows blindly. The mother's incomprehensible order, however, cannot be followed because it does not explicate the subject of the offence, or the addressee of the apology. It imposes onto the child a guilt to which no apology can ever correspond: The order 'Stephen will apologise' predicts a compensation by way of the *logos*, language and rationality, so that Stephen will always have to go on speaking in his defence, and will have never said enough.

What makes the order a traumatizing blow is that, unlike the father's infantile tale of the 'moocow', 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. Neither the name *Stephen* nor the words of the order and threat comment on the referential gap. Reference is not explained but dictated — because there is no way to explain arbitrary signs, as even the gentle tale of the 'moocow' demonstrates. While the first encounter with naming gestures towards the named *cow* by way of onomatopoeia (*moo*), the second encounter with language is shocking as it points out that this is not how language usually works. The mother and her duplicate do not even need to see the child under the table in order to name it, to threaten it, and to tell it what to do. The shock is that the name is arbitrary and that there is, still, no way to escape from being named and

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63 Ibid., pp. 5–6.

64 Cf. Acts 6. 5–8. 4.

65 Proverbs 30. 17. *The Bible: Authorized King James Version with Apocrypha*, ed. by Robert Carroll and Steven Prickett (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

thus evoked. Names make things that are not visible, such as Stephen, and that are not even there, such as ‘the eagles’, appear. The answer to the shocking strike is given in lines that look like a playful song the child sang earlier,<sup>66</sup> which makes apparent that Joyce read Vico.<sup>67</sup> The song featuring the rhyme ‘eyes’/‘apologise’ is an apotropaic echo that responds to the rhyme of the order and threat by repeating the only thing about them that can be grasped. The lines are not taken seriously enough by Derek Attridge, who says that in the song the sound of language ‘overwhelms its rational communicative function: words are progressively emptied of their meaning.’<sup>68</sup> Thomas Docherty equally states that ‘in the corporeality of the word, understanding is lost.’<sup>69</sup> The distinction between sound and sense is vain when there is nothing to understand. In the apotropaic echo of the order and threat, ‘sense’ is restored by way of forming a ‘sound’ — a strategy that employs a basic principle of articulate speech in order to cope with the shock of being subjected to language. The sound effect of the rhyme entails semantic effects. The song voices the requested apology. 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 intends to silence the child by means of an order that leaves no room for an answer.

With this traumatic scene of language acquisition, Joyce’s *Portrait* outlines an ambiguity that is also to be found in the speech of Kafka’s ‘recent human,’<sup>70</sup> Red Peter. In comparison to individual sounds and natural noises, codified articulate language comes as a shock, and is acquired as a means to respond to this violence. Joyce’s *Portrait* analyses not how but why the highly regulated human language is acquired.

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66 ‘He sang that song. That was his song. | *O, the geen wothe botheth*’ (Joyce, *Portrait*, p. 5).

67 Richard Ellmann, *James Joyce*, new and rev. edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 340.

68 Derek Attridge, ‘Language, Sexuality, and the Remainder in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*’, in *James Joyce and the Difference of Language*, ed. by Laurent Milesi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 128–41 (p. 135).

69 Thomas Docherty, ‘“sound sense”; or “tralala”/“moocow”: Joyce and the Anathema of Writing’, in *James Joyce and the Difference of Language*, ed. by Laurent Milesi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 112–27 (p. 124).

70 North, *The Yield*, p. 222.

What he points out is not the infant's will to communicate (sound structures seem to suffice for that) 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. Joyce's *Portrait* thus suggests that a mother tongue is as little a first *language* as it is *native*, and that it is not so much taught as it is inflicted on a child, like a wound, regulating later communication by leaving a scar — to talk about as a personal, never fully comprehensible history. Yet that very scar also provides the symbolic means for standing up to this and later traumatic blows, such as when Stephen later confronts English for being a colonial language in Ireland.<sup>71</sup> The traumatic origin of language therefore does not remain a wound but becomes a scar. In Joyce, the two structural notions of language that Bielik-Robson differentiates complement one another: Articulate language provides the means for compensating the damage caused by its acquisition, and it does so in such a way that language keeps testifying to the initial trauma. Insofar as articulate language forces one to take one thing for another in order to be a social being, and provides no explanation or defence that was not already based on this principle of symbolic substitution, each language is a *scarspeak*.

One important aspect, however, is still missing in order to think the mother tongue in terms of a scar: any concept of language pertains to communities as much as it does to individuals. Thinking of language acquisition as scarification allows one to reflect the political aspect of community-formation particularly well, given that the intentional infliction of scars is just as much a means of distinguishing communities as it is differentiating between languages is. Veteranyi articulates the tension between traumatic individual and marginalized group history as well as the violence at the basis of individualization and community. Escaped into exile from Communist Romania at the age of five, Veteranyi was raised in the circus around the world, speaking Romanian and Spanish, and was temporarily schooled in Switzerland, yet remained illiterate until her late teen years. Published in 1999, *Why*

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71 Joyce, *Portrait*, p. 203: 'My ancestors threw off their language and took another, Stephen said. They allowed a handful of foreigners to subject them. Do you fancy I am going to pay in my own life and person debts they made?'

*the Child Is Cooking in the Polenta* traces her childhood, including the stages of language acquisition.<sup>72</sup> The text's childlike speech echoes her parents' terms and concerns. Oral internalization as a technique of comprehension features prominently in her work; it complements verbal expression and resonates strongly with psychoanalytic accounts of sign development out of the need to fill the empty mouth:<sup>73</sup> 'I know my [...] country only by smell. It smells like my mother's cooking' (Mein Land kenne ich nur vom Riechen. Es riecht wie das Essen meiner Mutter).<sup>74</sup> Unlike the gaze that allows one to tell the viewer apart from the viewed, the sense of smell does not evoke clear distinctions. Antitheses of home and foreign country, inside and outside, although often evoked, appear to be as volatile as smell:

Mein Vater hat eine andere Muttersprache als wir, er war auch in unserem Land ein Fremder.

Er gehört zu den anderen, sagt meine Mutter.

Im Ausland sind wir aber keine Fremden untereinander, obwohl mein Vater hier fast in jedem Satz eine andere Sprache spricht, [...]

Seine Muttersprache klingt wie Speck mit Paprika und Sahne. Sie gefällt mir, aber er darf sie mir nicht beibringen.

Wenn er mit uns reden will, soll er unsere Sprache sprechen, sagt meine Mutter.

Mein Vater stammt aus einem Vorort von Rumänien, ich glaube, daß er deshalb zornig ist, weil wir aus der Hauptstadt kommen.

(My father has a different [mother tongue] from us; even in our own country he was a foreigner.

He [belongs to the others], my mother says.

In foreign countries we're not foreigners to one another, though, even if my father does speak almost every sentence in a different language [here]; [...]

His [mother tongue] sounds like bacon with peppers and sour cream. I like it, but he's not allowed to teach it to me.

If he wants to talk to us, he should speak our language, my mother says.

72 Aglaja Veteranyi, *Why the Child Is Cooking in the Polenta*, trans. by Vincent Kling (Champaign, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 2012); Aglaja Veteranyi, *Warum das Kind in der Polenta kocht* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1999).

73 Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*, v (1973), pp. 565–66; Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, 'Mourning or Melancholia: Introjection versus Incorporation', in *The Shell and the Kernel: Renewals of Psychoanalysis*, trans. by Nicholas T. Rand (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), pp. 27–128.

74 Veteranyi, *Why*, p. 8; Veteranyi, *Warum*, p. 10.

My father comes from [some] suburb in Romania; I think he's so angry because [we] come from the capital.)<sup>75</sup>

On the one hand, it is obvious and consistent that the father should have a mother tongue on his own, for he has a different mother than the narrating child. The explication of the distinction the child's mother draws so rigorously between the two of them and the father, on the other hand, points out that what is at stake is no peculiar, culinary concept of language or family ties. The child voices a quite ordinary discourse of social exclusion that the mother brought along into exile, a discourse that employs any linguistic, geographical, or other dichotomy that promises to prove superiority. The vehemence of the distinctions suggests that she considers the father Rom or Sinto.<sup>76</sup> Yet instead of establishing clear-cut distinctions, the mother's discourse outlines the inconsistency of all qualifications of things as *own* as opposed to *foreign*: It suggests that even the father is not family, but 'belongs to the others', only less so when the family is in a foreign country — that the homeland is not the father's land, even if it is called *patrie* in Romanian — and that although it is the opposite of 'foreign countries', Romania is itself split up into realms of different quality.

In an attempt to compensate for the contempt, exclusion, and continuous loss en route,<sup>77</sup> the child is regularly told that as members of a circus, 'we're international!' (*wir sind international!*).<sup>78</sup> Yet few things, she finds, are truly in between the nations, and beyond their differentiation. Suffering and eating are among them: 'BEING SLAUGHTERED THE CHICKEN SCREECH INTERNATIONALLY, WE UNDERSTAND THEM EVERYWHERE' (*BEIM SCHLACHTEN KREISCHEN DIE HÜHNER INTERNATIONAL, WIR VERSTEHEN SIE ÜBERALL*).<sup>79</sup> Fear of death appears as *lingua franca* in

75 Veteranyi, *Warum*, p. 50; Veteranyi, *Why*, p. 46 (translation modified).

76 'My sister is good-looking like a man; she gets into fights with all the other children. She's a Gypsy. | I WANT TO BE A GYPSY TOO' (Veteranyi, *Why*, p. 27); 'Meine Schwester ist schön wie ein Mann, sie prügelt sich mit allen Kindern. Sie ist eine Zigeunerin. | ICH WILL AUCH EINE ZIGEUNERIN SEIN' (Veteranyi, *Warum*, p. 31).

77 'WE MUST NEVER GROW FOND OF ANYTHING' (Veteranyi, *Why*, p. 15); 'WIR DÜRFEN NICHTS LIEBGEWINNEN' (Veteranyi, *Warum*, p. 18).

78 *Ibid.*, p. 53; p. 57.

79 My translation, cf. *ibid.*, p. 14; p. 17.

Veteranyi. Not wanting to die and perish — of hunger or terror, in incomprehensible institutions, in abusive families, or in a soup — seems to be the only thing that lasts, and that is there to be understood. While making clear that it is not just any *others* in some *outside* who exercise cruelty, but everyone, the preparation and consumption of food still reveals stability amidst the ever-changing accommodations, languages, and identifying distinctions. The distinction of the mother's tongue drawn — or, rather, cut — so violently establishes no sense of belonging but an analytic distance, leaving the never voiced but abundantly thematized Romanian language as a scar within Veteranyi's utterly (Swiss) German discourse, a scar that necessitates and shapes the narrative.

These short readings may serve to outline that thinking of the mother tongue as a scar aims not at replacing other metaphors — Kafka, Joyce, and Veteranyi evoke the notions of *mother*, *father*, *native*, and *first* language — yet the notion of the scar contributes to comprehending the violence that these common concepts entail.

Juliane Prade-Weiss, 'Scarspeak: Thinking the Mother Tongue as a Formative Mark', in *Untying the Mother Tongue*, ed. by Antonio Castore and Federico Dal Bo, Cultural Inquiry, 26 (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2023), pp. 105–26 <[https://doi.org/10.37050/ci-26\\_5](https://doi.org/10.37050/ci-26_5)>

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