THE SENSE OF A BEGINNING:

THEORY OF THE LITERARY OPENING

A Dissertation

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School

of Cornell University

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

By

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January 2012

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Cornell University 2012

This dissertation is the first comprehensive study in English of the literary opening and its impact on modern literary criticism. It thus fills an astounding gap in Anglo-American criticism, which has neglected openings and instead focused on endings, as exemplified by Frank Kermode's *The Sense of an Ending* (1967). Through a study of the constant formal challenges of novelistic openings, primarily during modernism, this dissertation illustrates the significance of the opening in literary creation and in literary criticism. Chapter 1 analyses how openings attempt to lend authority from natural beginnings as well as from cosmologies, which leads to the conclusion that the beginning of a story is also a story of the beginning. Chapter 2 examines literary openings more closely from a formal and narrative point of view, thereby outlining a theory of openings based on linguistic considerations such as pragmatic conventions and cooperative rules. The chapter establishes a taxonomy of openings based on five "signals" of the opening. In particular, the chapter develops the concept of "perspectival abruptness", which is to be differentiated from the temporal abruptness known as *in medias res*. "Perspectival abruptness" is presented as a tool for the critic and the literary historian to understand the particular nature of modern fiction. Chapter 3 focuses on the modern opening and literature's higher sense of self-awareness. In particular, through discussions of notably Roland Barthes and Edward Said, the chapter investigates how the modern opening has transformed modern criticism through the

concept of intertextuality. In chapter 4, Paul Valéry's mockery of the novelistic opening serves to illustrate more concretely the influence of intertextuality on literary openings. The epilogue expounds on the ideological schism between Anglo-American and French criticism with regard to literary openings. It concludes that openings can only be fully understood in their relations to linguistic and literary conventions. The dissertation includes an appendix that outlines the existing criticism on literary openings until today.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Niels Buch Leander (né Niels Buch-Jepsen) was born in Aarhus, Denmark in 1973 to Knud and Birte Buch-Jepsen. After attending high school at Aarhus Katedralskole, he went to Britain in 1994 to undertake a B.A. Honours in analytical philosophy at Trinity College, University of Cambridge. After his graduation in 1997, Niels was offered a place at the Ecole Normale Supérieure in Fontenay-aux-Roses near Paris. During his two years at the E.N.S., he shifted his academic focus from philosophy to literature, first undertaking a D.E.A. in philosophical aesthetics at Paris I-Panthéon-Sorbonne, under the guidance of Professor Yves Michaud, and then a D.E.A. in French Literature at Paris IV-Sorbonne, under the guidance of Professor Antoine Compagnon. In 1999, Niels came to Cornell University, Ithaca, New York and received a M.A. in Comparative Literature in 2002. From 2001-02 he held a position as Research Associate at the University of Newcastle, England, working on Paul Valéry's private library with Professor Brian Stimpson and the C.N.R.S. After 11 years of expatriate life, Niels returned to Denmark in 2004 to take up a position as Assistant Research Professor at the University of Copenhagen due to an allowance from the Carlsberg Foundation. In 2008, he shifted career and currently works as a business consultant at NNIT in Copenhagen, specializing in regulatory consultancy to the life sciences industry. In August 2011, Niels defended this Ph.D.-dissertation at Cornell University. He has published various academic articles and book chapters, especially in the crosssection between subjectivist theory and literary theory. His publications are listed on page 218 of this dissertation. Niels is married to Else-Marie Buch Leander with whom he has two daughters Astrid and Sigrid.

Dedicated to Else-Marie

"Geschrieben steht: 'Im Anfang war das Wort!'
Hier stock ich schon! Wer hilft mir weiter fort?"
Goethe's *Faust*

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My sincerest gratitude goes to my special committee: Professor Jonathan Culler, Professor Richard Klein and Professor Harry Shaw, whom I am very proud to have worked with. Apart from being a tremendous support, Jonathan has always been a source of inspiration due to his remarkable critical clarity and his high standards when it comes to academic writing. I remember being in a Parisian library a late night back in 1998 before coming to Cornell, reading his *Structuralist Poetics*. After one year of intense exposure to the French theorists, whose themes I adored, but whose writing style I abhorred, I was struck by the fact that Jonathan managed to explain and present French theory in a logical and argumentative fashion that no Frenchman seemed capable of doing. In precisely this paradox I located my own intellectual identity, by being brought up in the argumentative logic of Cambridge philosophy, but exposed to the Parisian intellectual energy. I thank him for his lucidity and his availability, whether for a coffee on campus or for a bifsteak in a Parisian bistrot.

I thank Richard, for his confidence in my theoretical take and his critical and social curiosity, and Harry for his unique combination of openness and solidity.

My thanks also go to Professor Doug Mao who served on my committee during his time at Cornell University and to Professor Brian Stimpson who was my mentor during my stay in Newcastle and Paris in 2001-03, opening whole new aspects of the profession to my eyes. I am moreover grateful to all faculty members and co-students at Cornell who offered an unrivalled, intellectual and social community in Ithaca. I am particularly thinking of Dwight Codr, Meghan Freeman, Marlon Kuzmick, Will Hacker, Rob Odom, Brandon Harvey, Gabrielle McIntire, Ross Halvorsen, Marie-Louise Vierø, Svend Svenstrup and Dorian Stuber, but the list is indeed as

innumerable as all the good memories I have of my spell at Cornell. The always intense discussions and experiences evolving around Dwight were the highlights of this period.

I am thankful to the Department of Comparative Literature as well as the Graduate School at Cornell University for providing me with excellent conditions for research as well as generous financial support over the years, including summer grants, travel grants, a "Thanks to Scandinavia" Fellowship and a Mellon Completion Fellowship. Moreover, without the financial support from the Danish Research Academy, now under the Danish Agency for Science, Technology and Innovation, this Ph.D. would not have been possible. I therefore thank the Agency as well as all the anonymous Danish taxpayers who unknowingly contributed to this research.

I thank the University of Nebraska Press for the permission to use material from my book chapter "To Begin with the Beginning" in chapter 1 of this dissertation, and I thank the Presses de l'Université Laval for the permission to use a translated version of my book chapter "L'intertextualité de l'incipit romanesque" as chapter 4 in this dissertation.

Many friends have cheered me on during the long process of completing this dissertation. In addition to the Cornellians mentioned above, I thank Filippo de Vivo, Henrik Ø. Breitenbauch, Søren Peter Andreasen, James Anderson, Anya Serota, Catherine Lister, Pierre Grouix and Anders Hinsby for all their inspiring distractions. Special thanks to Filippo, my close comrade and academic co-worker, for his constancy and kind attention ever since those bewildering and wonderful undergraduate years. I thank him for all those long hours in various research libraries around the globe and for his generous reflections and enthusiasm.

It is only natural to thank those who anticipated and participated in my own beginning, my parents, Knud and Birte Buch-Jepsen, whose tolerant, supportive attitude made it

uncomplicated to choose a graduate school 5000 kilometers from the farm of Bjørreshøjgård. Thanks also to my brothers Anders, Jens and Lars Buch-Jepsen for shaping and sharpening me in my childhood.

My thoughts first and foremost go to my wife and the love of my life, Else-Marie Buch Leander. She is truly the one who influenced the writing process most concretely and convinced me to restructure the dissertation in its current shape. I thank her for her keen participation in all aspects of my life, and I look forward to also sharing my postdoctoral life with her and with our two wonderful daughters Astrid and Sigrid.

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How To Begin

"The beginning is always the chief thing in every process"

Plato: *Republic*

Illustration 1: Janus head from Roman coin

Beginnings are so central and so complex that in ancient times they required their own god. The two-faced Janus looking both back and forth in time was the Roman god of

beginnings whose dual outlook was to ease the temporal complexity of any initiation[1]. January, the first month of the year, is still named in honor of this intricate god who both remembers the year that passed and looks ahead to the year to come.

If this god of beginnings helps smooth transitions, his efficacy does, however, come at a certain price. A modern interpretation will not fail to recognize that the god's particular perspective also endows him with a doubtful character: you cannot see his two faces at the same time; he might be deceitful or – as we tellingly say – double-faced. We may have to depend upon him, yet we know that there is something cunning about him. We may need him, yet we know perfectly well that he is ambiguous.

In this dissertation, I shall reveal the Janus-headed nature of fiction through a study of the literary opening. A novel's first lines mark the transition from the reader's own world to a narrated world – a transition from the reader's reality to a textual reality. This transition is however so uniquely complex that in the process the reader will have to embrace a certain "deception". The opening will have to say as *much* as possible and as *little* as possible in order to lure the reader into the textual reality. As I shall argue in chapter 1, the ability to accept such a deception is, all the same, pivotal in the human ability to understand beginnings in life in general and literary beginnings therefore play an instrumental role in making us apprehend reality.

Beginnings are in this sense more important than endings, I claim. Admittedly, we note a symmetry between beginnings and endings in so far as an ending marks the reversed transition from the narrated world back into the reader's world. Yet, from a formal point of view this symmetry breaks down. For one thing, endings have conventionally been marked metatextually

[1] Janus was also the god of prefaces and prologues, which is why it seems very appropriate to evoke him here. For more on Janus, see Denis Hollier, *Against Architecture: The Writings of Georges Bataille* (Cambridge, Ma.: MIT Press, 1989). (Footnotes and the bibliography in this dissertation are formatted according to Chicago 16th A.)

by “The End”, “La Fin”, or “Explicit liber”; the book is over. This Latin term for ending, “explicit”, says it all: the exit of the narrative can be explicit – and should be clearly marked. In contrast, the literary beginning – the “incipit” – does not conventionally have its own metatextual marker. Typically, a novel simply begins. A number of implicit, paratextual markers will naturally sustain the beginning, but otherwise we simply have to trust that the beginning is the beginning. And as in the case of Janus, our trust in the beginning only works fully when we somehow accept that we are simultaneously being “deceived”.

If the literary beginning is never explicitly marked, it tends instead to rely upon implicit indications and conventions that can smooth the transition into the textual reality. The reader will have to be presented with a beginning that is recognizably a beginning. I therefore claim that the literary beginning will relate more naturally to particular literary conventions and, above all, to the universal and archetypal incipit “Once upon a time”, as I shall discuss at greater length in chapter 2. Yet, the literary beginning is twofaced also in this sense: it cannot avoid relating to prior conventions of beginning, yet this is also precisely what prompts a quest for finding innovative loopholes in the conventions.

The beginning is therefore privileged indeed. First, it marks the place where the transition between text and reality is most distinct. Second, the complexity of this transition makes the text relate more directly to prior conventions of beginning than the rest of the text, accentuating the intertextual relation between one beginning and another, as I examine in chapter 3 and 4. Moreover, the opening sets off our mind in a certain direction, which inevitably influences the lines that follow and thus shape our entire reading experience. As the German author Martin Walser puts it, “the novel is always a game, but the first line irrevocably shows how the game

should be played"[2]. In this sense, the beginning is unique by being the only literary component that is available at all moments of our reading experience, even at its conclusion.

From considerations of these three textual relations – "hors-texte", intertext, intratext – it is evident that the literary beginning is more than a mere prelude to the work itself; it is no less than the most central place to observe a work's literariness. As I show in more detail in chapter 2, the beginning is simply "le lieu littéraire par excellence", as the Italian author Italo Calvino claims[3].

It is therefore astonishing that literary criticism in English has dealt very little with the literary opening. In fact, the current dissertation project started with my own surprise at the lack of critical works on the subject[4]. Since the dawn of time people have reflected theologically and philosophically on beginnings, as my first chapter will pursue. Yet, despite obvious parallels between cosmological concepts like 'origin' and 'conception' and the ones used to describe literary creation, literary critics have not concerned themselves much with openings. Occasionally, articles on literary openings have appeared in English, but always as rather isolated and singular contributions to the discipline, for instance when elucidating a particular text or the methods of a certain author. This dissertation can therefore lay claim to being the first comprehensive study in English of the modern literary opening[5]. Yet, this fact calls for

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[2] My translation of "Der Roman ist zwar immer ein Spiel, aber der erste Satz entscheidet unerbittlich, wie diesmal gespielt werden soll". Martin Walser, "Erfahrungen mit ersten Sätzen oder Aller Anfang ist schwer," in *Vormittag eines Schriftstellers* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1994), 162.

[3] Italo Calvino, "Appendice: cominciare e finire," in *Saggi 1945-1985*, ed. M. Barenghi (Milan: Mondadori, 1995).

[4] As the narratologist James Phelan exclaimed when asked: "There's not that much on beginnings period" (in an e-mail to my dissertation committee member Professor Harry E. Shaw).

[5] The only full-length study of the opening that has appeared in the English language is A. D. Nuttall's book from 1992 *Narrative Beginnings from the Epic to the Novel*, which, however, focuses on literature from Homer to 1850, whereas the present study will focus on the development from 1850 up until present day. Nuttall's book will be discussed in chapter 1. A monograph on the medieval opening has appeared, which I also involve in chapter 1: D.

explanation rather than celebration: such a lack of critical works on the opening is no less than baffling, especially when we think of the increasing importance of the participatory reader both in modern literary criticism and in the commercial book market[6]. One of my ambitions in this dissertation is therefore also to uncover possible reasons for this prior neglect of the literary opening.

We could hardly explain this neglect by arguing that no one has ever urged literary scholars to examine openings further. As early as in 1943, the renowned medieval scholar Ernst Curtius deplored the lack of "evident ordering principles and a comprehensive exposition of beginnings"[7]. In 1979, the leading narratologist of the German-speaking world, Franz Stanzel, notes that "the problem of theme/rheme arrangement [in the opening] has scarcely been examined by narrative criticism", assessing with full confidence that "the question would be a very rewarding area for future research"[8]. In 1980, the Romance scholar Victor Brombert of Princeton University started collecting some of the central considerations in an article, pointing out that "the field of opening signals still remains fairly uncharted territory"[9]. Thirty years after Brombert's article, this assertion still holds true, even despite the discipline's strengthened interest in conventions of reading during the past decades. One exception is the volume

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Vance Smith, *The book of the incipit : beginnings in the fourteenth century*, Medieval cultures ; v. 28 (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2001).

[6] Modern manuals for hopeful writers cannot emphasize this strategic position strongly enough. In their handbook *So You Want to Write*, Piercy and Wood devote a long chapter to "The Importance of Beginnings", knowing the modern reader's impatient and impulsive consumption, Marge Piercy and Ira Wood, *So You Want To Write: How to Master the Craft of Writing Fiction and the Personal Narrative* (MA: Leapfrog Press, 2001). At the world's largest bookseller, amazon.com, readers have access to precisely the opening when making their decision whether to buy a book.

[7] Ernst Robert Curtius, "Mittelalter-Studien," *Zeitschrift für Romanische Philologie* 63(1943): 246.

[8] Franz Karl Stanzel, *A Theory of Narrative*, trans. Charlotte Goedsche (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984). 164.

[9] Victor Brombert, "Opening Signals in Narrative," *New Literary History* 11, no. 3 (1980): 493.

Narrative Beginnings from 2008 edited by Brian Richardson and to which I contributed with a book section consisting of material from chapter 1 of this dissertation[10]. Anthologies of opening lines have appeared, in print as well as online, but only with the carefree perspective of book lovers cherishing their favorite novels, not as a tool for critical insight[11].

Whenever the topic of openings is mentioned, one work does however spring to everyone's mind: Edward Said's early work, *Beginnings* from 1975[12]. Yet, people seem to have forgotten that this monumental work fails altogether to address the question of a work's concrete opening, establishing instead a theoretical inquiry into the authorial process of beginning. In fact, on the 414 pages of this colossal work, Said only thrice discusses literary openings[13]. As I will discuss in more detail in chapter 3, *Beginnings* is not centrally concerned with literary openings, but with an attack on authoritative, "dynastic" relations in the literary field. It is therefore paradoxical that the authority of Said and the sheer monumentality of his book may have had the unfortunate consequence of having pre-empted further critical interest in the question of openings. In a sense we as critics seem "to have ended with Said's beginning", as Vance Smith fittingly puts it"[14].

Yet, the presence of Said's book hardly explains entirely why the field of openings appears to have been so oddly neglected in Anglo-American criticism in contrast to, for instance, French criticism, as is one of my central points throughout this dissertation. Could part of the

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[10] Brian Richardson, ed. *Narrative Beginnings: Theories and Practices*, Frontiers of Narrative (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008).

[11] See the appendix to this dissertation for references to anthologies and critical articles.

[12] Edward W. Said, *Beginnings: intention and method* (New York: Basic Books, 1975).

[13] Ibid., 43-46, 84, 89. In these three passages, Said discusses the openings of *The Prelude* and *Paradise Lost* and the opening of *Huckleberry Finn* as well as the the narrative frames of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.

[14] Smith, *The Book of the Incipit*: xii.

explanation also to be found in the methodological problem of *delimiting* such a study? After all, all books begin… The critic is naturally faced with a potentially infinite pool of openings. Could one ever examine openings in a comprehensive fashion without relying on a somewhat arbitrary selection of beginning?

This methodological worry is – as I discuss below – genuine. Yet, we notice that critics have not refrained from discussing *endings*, which of course would be subject to the same methodological concern. A central work in modern literary criticism is thus Frank Kermode's *The Sense of an Ending* (1967), which is representative of a quite extensive literature on endings such as David Richter's *Fable's End: Completeness and Closure in Rhetorical Fiction* (1974), D. A. Miller's *Narrative and Its Discontents* (1981), Marianna Torgovnick's *Closure in the Novel* (1981), and Peter Brooks' *Reading for the Plot* (1992)[15].

These works do not fail to mention the beginning, but they all, in one way or the other, subordinate the beginning to the sway of the ending. Just as Kermode has his "recursive reading" and Brooks his "anticipation of retrospection", Torgovnick claims that "in novels, as in lyrics, the process of closure often begins with the work's first lines"[16]. The import of the beginning is thus almost systematically negated by being reduced to an effect of the *telos*. The beginning can in this way never be read in its own right, not even as setting up the fundamental conditions of the reading process.

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[15] Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending* (New York: Oxford UP, 1967); David H. Richter, *Fable's End: Completeness and Closure in Rhetorical Fiction* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1974); D. A. Miller, *Narrative and its Discontents* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981); Marianna Torgovnick, *Closure in the Novel* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981); Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (Cambridge MA: Harvard UP, 1992).

[16] Torgovnick, *Closure in the Novel*: 10.

The peculiar lack of works on beginnings is thus further underscored by the strong presence of works on endings. Noting that these works furthermore tend to undo the beginning, I shall argue in chapter 3 that considerations of beginnings and considerations of endings are not at all complimentary to each other. It is instead an *ideological* question that divides beginnings and endings. I thus observe that while the Anglo-American critical tradition tends to negate the opening in the work's teleology, French critics have more readily investigated and recognized the impact of the opening[17]. It is for instance also indicative that Curtius and Brombert, whom I mentioned above for calling for further research into openings, both were Romance scholars, Brombert for instance drawing on discussions from French criticism of Aragon and Raymond Roussel. My study of the beginning thus aims *en route* to illuminate a central aspect of the great divide between Anglo-American and French criticism.

One of the presuppositions underlying my dissertation is thus that, from a critical point of view, beginnings and endings tend mutually to exclude or annihilate each other, not compliment each other. As a consequence, an interest in beginnings will rest on a particular vision of literature that tends to challenge the teleology of the work. When Yves Navarre in his book *Premières pages* (1983) names all chapters "chapitre I", he does so in a conviction that "[a]u chapitre 2 commence le terrible mensonge de l'œuvre établie, structurée, ordonnée"[18]. An interest in beginnings is also based on a wish to remain innovative and original.

Since it is a common conception that modern literature is more conscious of its own mode of opening, I devote chapter 3 to a study of modernist beginnings. Somewhat paradoxically, modernist texts seem both to lack recognizable beginnings and to see beginnings

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[17] I will elaborate on the schism between French and Anglo-American criticism in chapter 3, the epilogue and the appendix.

[18] Yves Navarre, *Premières pages. Roman* (Paris: Flammarion, 1983).

as a unique space of experimentation. A close attention to historical changes in the stylistics of openings will, however, elucidate these inconsistencies and show how much of modernism's uncompromising, yet contradictory character can be read in the period's perception of the beginning.

The historical survey of the modernist opening in chapter 3 will furthermore illustrate my suggestion in chapter 2 that openings are expressions of historical variations that can be identified by the literary critic. Literary history has had notorious difficulties in being truly *literary*, tending instead to slide into sociological or materialist considerations of historical periods. Literary history has, to put it bluntly, been quite disappointing when it comes to explaining formal shifts historically. However, a focus on a concrete formal unit such as the opening will provide a means of observing changes in the fundamental literary categories. The eminent Russian critic Jurij Tynjanov thus claims that a central literary concept like "influence" can "only be affirmed when identical functions bring about identical or analogous formal elements"[19]. As I shall show, the opening provides precisely such a formal element that can be compared synchronically as well as diachronically by the literary historian.

I began by arguing that the beginning is twofaced insofar as it serves two functions: it needs both to say as *much* as possible and as *little* as possible. That is to say, the literary opening serves in the first place to expose and prepare the book that follows and must provide sufficient information for the story to get under way. The opening of Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones* (1749) is thus presented as "[c]ontaining as much of the birth of the foundling as is necessary or proper to

[19] This is what Tynjanov calls an "auto-function". Jurij Tynjanov, "On Literary Evolution," in *Readings in Russian Poetics: Formalist and Structuralist Views*, ed. Ladislav Matejka and Krystyna Pomorska (Ann Arbor: Michigan Slavic Publications, 1978), 68.

acquaint the reader with in the beginning of this history"[20]. Yet, an opening must not only inform, but also grab and draw in its reader. This is most frequently achieved by withholding or suppressing information, which means that this secondary function often works directly against the opening's expositional function. To the reader, the opening thus represents both what I call an *exposition* and an *exposure*.

A text's particular 'mode' of opening will depend largely on how these two faces of the opening play off against each other. In my view, a major reason for the critical interest in the opening therefore lies precisely in determining the tension and oscillation between these two opposing functions of the opening. By thus comparing different modes of opening, my claim is that we may begin to conjecture about historical changes in the formal and cosmological outlooks that underlie them[21].

One methodological complication to this task is however that an opening has no clear limits. As already mentioned, an opening is never explicitly marked. We do have a number of paratextual indications, such as title, title page, etc, that may assist us in locating where a text begins[22]. Yet, even these paratextual indications may sometimes play a direct textual role; a title may, as in the case of *Tom Jones*, be part of the opening; a preface may, as in the case of Italo Svevo's *Coscienza di Zeno* (1923), be the very opening[23]. Though, for the most part, readers possess an intuitive notion of where the text begins and tend to locate the beginning of a text quite uniformly.

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[20] This is the title of the book's first chapter. Henry Fielding, *The History of Tom Jones, a Foundling* (London: A. Millar, 1749).

[21] I am fully aware that establishing a history of the beginning also perpetuates the narrative structure based on beginning, middle, and end.

[22] For a through examination of these paratextual elements, see Gérard Genette, *Seuils* (Paris: Seuil, 1987).

[23] Italo Svevo, *La coscienza di Zeno* (Bologna: L. Cappelli, 1923).

Where the beginning *ends* is, however, far more difficult to say. Is the opening simply the first line, the *incipit*? Or is it rather the first three lines, the first paragraph, the first page, or even the first chapter? The most clear-cut criterion would be simply to consider the *incipit*, e.g. the first line. Yet, even this criterion may not always be entirely straightforward. If the first line is an exclamation like "Zut!", as is the case in Guy de Maupassant's *Pierre et Jean*, should the second line not also be taken under consideration in order to determine the source of this exclamation? At the other end of the spectrum we find Marie Ndiaye's *Comédie classique* (1987), whose 124 pages are written as one sentence; the entire novel is in fact one first line[24]! Rather than pursuing a definitive, clear-cut definition of the length of an opening, I will therefore propose a flexible, pragmatic answer: an opening ends when the reader has obtained the most elementary information about the spatial and temporal positioning of the narration. This may be achieved in the first line, but only rarely.

What is clear from this definition, and from this prologue in general, is that I shall principally look at literary openings from the point of view of their *reception* – not their *conception*. The opening is what leads the reader from a private reality into a textual reality and it is therefore concretely located at the beginning of the book. The place in the actual manuscript that the author *began writing* her book will not be taken into consideration in my study, fascinating as that question may be in other respects, for instance in the so-called "critique génétique", or genetic studies, which has become quite a large discipline in the French literary field. I shall however be the first to admit that the reception of a text cannot take place without at least an imagination of its conception. A text is laid out in the knowledge that it will be read in a particular order. Any opening will therefore be conceived with an understanding that the reading

[24] Marie Ndiaye, *Comédie classique* (Paris: P.O.L., 1987).

is supposed to begin precisely there. Although I shall focus mostly on how the opening appears to the reader, I will therefore occasionally allow myself to discuss how an author imagines the reader to receive the opening.

If modern commercial writers are keenly aware of the importance of an enticing opening for the subsequent success of their product, our present study cannot simply presuppose that literary openings always take full advantage of their privileged position. Some openings, even by – at the time – bestselling authors, are simply unmemorable, or even ordinary, for instance those by otherwise respected writers like Fyodor Dostoevsky and Henry de Montherlant[25]. In contrast, Samuel Beckett's openings are all analytically self-aware and superbly crafted[26]. In this dissertation, however, I am concerned principally with how an opening connects the reader with the work and therefore less concerned with evaluating the sheer artistic quality of openings. Hence, my study will deliberately shun the temptation to establish a sort of "canon" of the most elegant or most striking openings and instead focus on the literary effect of a vast variety of openings, good as well as bad.

I will therefore avoid approaching openings from the perspective of a bibliophile who revisits a cherished book through the emblem of the first line, as is the most common approach. Instead I have collected and catalogued openings from a great variety of authors and periods in

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[25] Openings by Dostoevsky: *The Idiot*: "Towards the end of November, during a thaw, at nine o'clock one morning, a train on the Warsaw and Petersburg railway was approaching the latter city at full speed". *Crime and Punishment*: "On an exceptionally hot evening early in July a young man came out of the garret in which he lodged in S. Place and walked slowly, as though in hesitation, towards K. bridge". Openings by Montherlant: *Les Célibataires*: "Ce soir froid de février 1924, sur les sept heures, un homme paraîssant la soixantaine bien sonnée, avec une barbe inculte et d'un gris douteux était planté sur une patte..."Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Idiot* (London: Penguin, 1955 [1868-1869]); Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1989 [1866]); Henry de Montherlant, *Les célibataires* (Paris: Grasset, 1934).

[26] As can be seen simply from the title of the novel *Comment C'est*, which in French is homophonous with the verb "commencer". Samuel Beckett, *Comment c'est* (Paris: Minuit, 1961).

order to draw as much comparative interest from them as possible. The problem is of course that all books begin, which means that my study faces a potentially infinite corpus. While the selection of a corpus is always a major methodological question, in this study it seems so much more pressing. A large number of novels must be considered for reaching a reliable level of generalization. Needless to say, however, the interest lies not in the statistics themselves, but in the texts. I suspect that there may simply be no steadfast method for finding the perfect balance between the statistical weight of a large number of texts and the elucidation of individual analyses. Instead I shall use criticism's two faces, generality and particularity, to pursue a study where openings enter into dialogue with each other and convey literature's earnest sense of a beginning.

– CHAPTER 1 –

To Begin with the Beginning:

A Cosmology of Openings

"Men can do nothing without the make-believe of a beginning"

George Eliot: The Opening of *Daniel Deronda*

Illustration 2: Aubrey Vincent Beardsley (1872-1898): *Incipit Vita Nova*

THE AMBIGUITY OF GENESIS

In the beginning was a syntactical ambiguity...[27] As *Genesis* opens with God's creation of the universe, theological debate immediately erupts in regards to the syntax of the divine word. Hebrew does not contain punctuation, and from the original it is therefore not clear whether the first verse of *Genesis* is a complete sentence or a temporal subordination. Does the Bible open with:

(A) In the beginning God created the Heavens and the Earth.

or instead with the subordinated clause:

(B) When God began to create the Heavens and the Earth…

which would make either *Genesis* 1.2. or 1.3 the main clause[28]?

The syntax of this opening line becomes terribly important, for it changes our entire conception of God's powers. If *Genesis* opens with an independent sentence, God is seen to create the universe out of nothing – a pure *creatio ex nihilo*. If, on the other hand, the first verse is a subordinated clause, it appears that the universe already consisted of chaotic matter, which God then turned into order and shaped the universe into life.

Genesis provides an illustrious example of a concurrence between a textual beginning – the Bible – and the description of an external beginning – the Judeo-Christian cosmology. The

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[27] Parts of this chapter were published as a chapter in the book *Narrative Beginnings*, Niels Buch Leander, "To Begin with the Beginning: Birth, Origin, and Narrative Inception," in *Narrative beginnings : theories and practices*, ed. Brian Richardson, *Frontiers of narrative* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008). I thank the University of Nebraska Press for the permission to reuse material from that book in this dissertation.

[28] This debate is discussed in further detail in Claus Westermann, *Biblischer Kommentar: Altes Testament: Genesis 1-11* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1974).

textual beginning describes a beginning; in this case, nothing less than the beginning of the universe. In this chapter I shall examine these relations between textual beginnings and regular beginnings, with a special attention to the way in which literary beginnings present and relate to cosmological beginnings. This is an important relation because, in the opening sentence, a book could be said to perform a "genesis" of its own. Indeed, "incipio" – the biblical "in the beginning" – is precisely what has induced the term "incipit", the Latin and now French term for the opening sentence of a literary text. Literary works *must* begin and do so by establishing the parameters of a narration, which did not previously have any presence in the reader. Literary openings are in this sense radically inaugural and at face value resemble cosmologies more than quotidian beginnings. In the Aristotelian tradition, for instance, it is the logical boundaries of the work – beginning and end – that establish a "cosmological" parallel that renders artistic mimesis possible[29].

In order to assess this "cosmological" facet of literary openings, I shall both examine beginnings conceptionally and show how different literary openings establish themselves as beginnings. As the debate about *Genesis* illustrates, the way we present a beginning shapes the way we conceive of it. This in turn reveals a fundamental rift in our approach to beginnings: Must a credible beginning be absolute? Or do we quite the opposite trust a beginning only when it openly declares its dependence upon premises and prior existence? This question cannot be answered altogether synchronically, but is subject to considerable historical variation. In the case of *Genesis*, for instance, the consensus amongst theologians and biblical commentators has shifted with time from the *creatio ex nihilo* of line (A) above towards the idea of line (B) above

[29] See page 30 for further discussion of the Aristotelian approach.

that creation must in any case presuppose the prior existence of matter[30]. How the literary opening reflects such historical variation will be touched upon in this chapter and pursued in more detail in chapter 3.

The old distinction between art and nature has caused scholars to distinguish between "artificial" and "natural" beginnings. This vocabulary, however, has the unfortunate consequence of insinuating that beginnings in art do not really take place. Strictly speaking, "artificial" means "made as a copy of something natural"[31], and a scholar like Anthony Nuttall accepts this meaning when asserting that: "the formality of an artificial opening necessarily simulates the validity and force of natural beginnings"[32]. But it would be incorrect to think of beginnings in art as mere replicas; books really do begin. And in the following I shall argue that if a literary opening echoes a "natural" creation or cosmology, it is not principally by way of imitation or simulation. Rather, it obtains its own authority to speak by dissenting from the established natural beginnings.

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[30] See Westermann, *Biblischer Kommentar: Altes Testament: Genesis 1-11*: 150. A 20th century commentator, W. R. Lane, even claims that "both translations [i.e. Genesis 1.1 as independent clause or as a subordinated clause] presuppose preexistent material which was transformed by creation", William R. Lane, "The Initiation of Creation," *Vetus Testamentum* 13(1963): 72. To complicate matters, at the time the Old Testament was written, there was, philologists have shown, no conceptual distinction between chaos and the absence of matter. Matter simply could not be without form; matter was order. Consequently, Genesis 1.1 could not at its conception have caused any ambiguity: the genesis would necessarily be absolute. Only from Augustine's Aristotelian theology (AD 354-430) emerges the idea that amorphous matter can exist, which makes a semantic distinction between (A) and (B) possible. (Cf. Augustine, *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, trans. E. B. Pusey (London: J. M. Dents & Sons, 1907).

[31] "Artificial," in *Concise Oxford Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

[32] Anthony David Nuttall, *Openings. Narrative Beginnings from the Epic to the Novel* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992). 23.

THE COMBINATIONAL CABALA: MODE OF CREATION VS. MODE OF BEGINNING

In the light of the sustained, syntactico-theological debate about the first verse of *Genesis*, it is not surprising that the world's first "formal" analysis of a textual opening was performed on precisely *Genesis*. In 1612, the German mystic Jacob Böhme sketched the power of the combinational cabala in his work with the rejuvenating title: *Aurora*[33]. An entire section of his book is entitled: "An exposition of the first verse of the first chapter of *Genesis*, according to the language of Nature". Those who think that this title sounds like a 20th century formalist essay, will be even more surprised to learn that the section consists in what we would call a "semantic" analysis based on the texture of the words of *Genesis*: The section is nothing less than a phonetic analysis of the *Old Testament*'s opening lines.

Böhme's curious exposition will, however, disappoint any linguistically conscious, modern reader. Böhme based his analysis on the German Bible, completely unperturbed by the fact that "God's word" necessarily sounds different in the original Hebrew. Furthermore, by using a translation of the Bible, Böhme had already determined central parts of his interpretation, for instance by taking the contentious first verse straightforwardly as an independent sentence (A) and not as a subordinated clause (B).

This, however, brings Böhme in line with most cabbalistic thinkers who endorse the Neoplatonic vision that God's attributes never manifest themselves. Without knowable attributes, God – also called "Ein-Sof", meaning "without end" – can only appear as nothingness[34]. When Böhme and the cabbalists read the first verse of *Genesis* as an independent sentence, their

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[33] Jacob Böhme, *The Aurora* (London: Watkins, 1960 [1612]).

[34] Harold Bloom, *Kabbalah and Criticism* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975). 24-25.

conception of the *creatio ex nihilo* thus takes a peculiar twist. If God created the world out of nothingness, and He himself is nothingness, He must have created the world out of Himself[35].

If, however, we compare Böhme's cabbalism and the two divergent, orthodox interpretation of the first line of *Genesis*, we notice one thing: that the effectiveness of these interpretations depends little on *how* they explain the world's creation. The interpretations differ, but the overall function of each interpretation is to articulate that the world *had* a beginning. It is more important to say that the world *began* than to say how it was created. This fact can in fact be observed in all creation myths, as Pettazzoni's classic work on the subject reveals: "What is of the greatest importance is that there should be a myth of beginnings, which may or may not be a myth of creation, but which cannot possibly be done without, for on this myth, be it what it may, the very existence of the universe and of mankind depend in any case"[36]. Even in cosmologies, the mode of *creation* is generally less important than the mode of *beginning.* A beginning has the ultimate explanatory authority because, unlike creation, a beginning seems both to escape experience and to define actual events. In a sense, a beginning contains this explanatory power precisely because it does not need to explain *itself* in the way that a creation does. This paradox also stresses the potential of the textual opening because the textual opening will always be more concerned with its mode of beginning than any mode of creation.

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[35] It appears somewhat ironic that the cabbalists in this way use an Aristotelian syllogism to subvert the Aristotelian distinction between cause and effect. Harold Bloom says " 'cause' and 'effect' are always reversible, for the Kabbalists regarded them as linguistic fictions, long before Nietzsche did", ibid., 25. This unorthodox cabbalistic perspective will become enlightening in my discussion in chapter 3 of the modernist and postmodernist vision of creation. For the moment, I note that Derrida discusses Böhme in his essay on Valéry and cites Hegel for stating that "Böhme fängt in der Aurora von den Qualitäten an". Jacques Derrida, "Qual Quelle - Les sources de Valéry," in *Marges de la philosophie* (Paris: Minuit, 1972), 338-39.

[36] R. Pettazzoni, "Myths of Beginning and Creation Myths," in *Essays on the History of Religion* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1954), 27f.

THE RELATION BETWEEN LITERARY OPENINGS AND COSMOLOGIES

How, then, do literary openings and cosmologies relate? Hillis Miller has fairly recently claimed that the literary opening is a "miniature, secular, all-too-human version of God's fiat lux – "Let there be light" – in *Genesis*"[37]. Although I agree that the inaugural potential of a literary opening is significant, I wish to maintain here that we must be more precise when describing this analogy. I therefore turn to analyzing a number of literary openings, which in one way or another reflect the biblical opening.

Miller rightly observes that a surprisingly great number of novels open by a beam of light or an open window, which he then construes as a reflection of the *fiat lux* of *Genesis*[38]. In order to determine the nature of this frequent literary *fiat lux*, let me first juxtapose two openings, one by Charles Dickens, which Miller himself mentions, and one by Edmond Jaloux, separated roughly by a century:

> The first ray of light which illumines the gloom, and converts into a dazzling brilliancy that obscurity in which the earlier history of the immortal Pickwick would appear to be involved...
>
> Charles Dickens: *Pickwick Papers* (1836)

> Jamais je n'avais vu jour aussi lumineux : la terre ne savait que faire du soleil, on baignait en pleine alchimie, tout tournait à la pierre philosophale. Chaque passant avait un visage de prospecteur ; en criblant les ruisseaux, on eût trouvé des pépites ; l'ombre elle-même était un vivier de rayons.
>
> Edmond Jaloux: *L'Age d'or* (1926)

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[37] J. Hillis Miller, "Literature as Virtual Reality," in *On Literature* (London ; New York: Routledge, 2002). In this text, Hillis Miller discusses the literary opening rather casually as the opening of a virtual reality.

[38] Ibid., 25. Miller seems here to have forgotten his 1958-analysis of *Bleak House*, where the light is dimmed. I discuss this analysis a bit later in this chapter, on page 39.

In the *Pickwick Papers*, an initial beam lights up the nearly primordial gloom and sets the history of the "immortal Pickwick" in motion. It is deliberately unclear who is speaking; the tone is impersonal, the grammatical subject is the ray of light, separated from its main predicate by subordinated predicates. Yet the omniscience of the narrator is evident from the way that the first ray is singled out and the entire history of Pickwick grasped. However, herein lies also, I claim, the irony of this opening. By picking the verb "convert", the opening overtly plays with religious nuances and parodies Pickwick's god-like status by the adjective "immortal".

In *L'Age d'or*, the perspective has shifted to a first person narration, a form that had become much more frequent in the beginning of the 20th century. With its many alliterations ("Jamais je", "tout tournait à la pierre philosophale"), the language is by design poetic, and the tone mythical and wondrous. Something is clearly in the making, the fecundity being accentuated by numerous water-metaphors "baignait", "ruisseaux", "vivier". Yet, the perspective of this creation is intriguingly reversed, just as the syntax of the first sentence is reversed and highlights the negation "jamais". Indeed, it is not the sunlight that gives life to the planet, but instead the earth that produces the sunshine. At the center of the wonder stands the philosopher's stone, the profane substance that can transmute the essence of things.

It seems fair to say that the *fiat lux* of *Genesis* is reflected in these literary openings. However, contrary to Miller, I maintain that the literary *fiat lux* functions not simply as a "secular miniature" of *Genesis*, but rather a reaction or rejoinder to it. The literary *fiat lux* does not evoke *Genesis* in order to borrow some of its authority; rather it establishes its own authority precisely by imitating *Genesis'* structure and rearranging it with a certain irony[39]. By exposing

[39] I discuss this use of irony more in chapter 2, from page 85.

the need to strive for its own authority, the literary beginning does admit to a certain conceptual vulnerability, yet this transformative wit is also a way to assure its own credibility as a beginning.

Even if the above openings do reflect the *fiat lux*, openings far from always imitate this performative act of creation. I could for instance juxtapose two other scene-setting openings by Dickens and Jaloux, which evoke cosmology even in the absence of any *fiat lux*:

> London. Michaelmas term lately over, and the Lord Chancellor sitting in Lincoln's Inn Hall. Implacable November weather. As much mud in the streets, as if the waters had but newly retired from the face of the earth, and it would not be wonderful to meet a Megalosaurus, forty feet long or so, waddling like an elephantine lizard up Holborn Hill.
>
> Charles Dickens: *Bleak House* (1852-3)

> La pluie tombait derrière les vitres, égale et continue, et la rue Cernuschi luisait doucement sous le ciel d'automne. Une lumière anémiée entrait dans la chambre et promenait sur les meubles clairs sa caresse.
> C'était un de ces jours maussades et comme impersonnels, où la vie n'apparaît qu'à travers des couches de brouillard et d'humidité, grisâtre, vague et mélancolique, à la manière de ces anémones gélatineuses et sans couleur, qui tapissent le fond de la mer. Simone de Clausel, debout contre une fenêtre, regardait l'eau intarissable […].
>
> Edmond Jaloux: *Le Démon de la vie* (1908)

Bleak House opens by providing specific spatial and temporal indications ("London", "Michaelmas") as it was so common in 19th century fiction. However, this temporal precision is

at odds with the opening's succession of tenseless noun-phrases[40]. Even when the series of noun-phrases ends, the verb-phrases fail to settle the tense since they are in the conditional mood ("as if the waters had", "it would"). In this way, Dickens' opening tries to establish itself outside time. A reversal to cosmology then takes place with the withdrawal of the waters, leaving the earth in the hands of prehistoric animals before finally recreating London.

Anthony Nuttall has argued that the opening of Bleak House is a "reversed Genesis", thereby arguing that even this reversal of *Genesis* is itself ultimately reversed[41]. Like Miller in his reading of *Pickwick Papers*, Nuttall fails however to appreciate Dickens' play with religious connotations. *Genesis 1.9-10* does talk of God separating the waters from the earth, but as it should be clear simply from the presence of dinosaurs, the cosmology of *Bleak House* is not that of a Christian cosmology. Dickens writes instead on a background of new sciences like paleontology and the nascent evolutionary theories of the Victorian period[42]. It is striking, for instance, that all terms with potential religious connotations instead all evoke the secular state. The "Lord" at the center of the reversed creation is hence the "Lord Chancellor", the second highest ranking of the "Great Officers of State" in Britain. "Michaelmas" is not the religious feast in honor of the archangel who announced that knowledge will flourish amongst those who will not be saved, but could refer instead to the autumn term in the university system or in the legal system[43].

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[40] A succession that A. D. Nuttall is even prepared to call "modernist". Nuttall, *Openings*: 195.

[41] Ibid.

[42] Which may also explain why Dickens makes a mistake when he describes a megalosaurus' walking like a lizard: a megalosaurus is a biped and walks more like a human being. As a background information, Charles Darwin's *Origin of the Species* appeared in 1859. Charles Darwin, *On the origin of species by means of natural selection* (London: J. Murray, 1859).

[43] According to the Old Testament, Michael is the Jews' archangel who announced the salvage of Israel; "At that time thy people shall be delivered, every one that shall be found written in the book. […] But thou, O Daniel, shut

Jaloux' *Le Démon de la vie* evokes a similar reversal to a primordial unification of waters and earth – or possibly to a city under the Flood. The light is weakened – or literally "bloodless": "anémiée". The phonetics of this term "anémiée" seems to lead to the central image of the colorless and gelatinous sea anemones that have covered the bottom of the sea since the dawn of time. The water is here "impersonal" and hides "life", as if God's creation has not yet occurred or is not accessible. One person does however appear, Simone, a reminder of St Peter's pre-Christian name, Simon, the fisherman.

An oddity about Jaloux' opening is that all four sentences quoted here could be shifted around arbitrarily; all four sentences could in fact have been the opening sentence ("La pluie tombait…", "Une lumière…", "C'était un…", "Simone…"). This may emphasize the monotony of the atmosphere, but as a critic it is difficult not to see it as a technical deficiency. Jaloux' opening seems not to define a clear logic of beginning; it does not have one sentence that sets the others in motion. Instead the sentences unconfidently keep using the indefinite article, "un", "une", as if they do not trust its own beginning. Dickens and Jaloux both use the trope of cosmological beginning; the principal difference in their literary efficiency is, however, that Dickens employs the trope to justify the use of definite articles, thereby taking its own myth of beginning seriously by presupposing the objects' existence. This is a formal consideration, which fundamentally changes the conditions of the beginning.

As already mentioned, Miller sees the literary opening echoing the *fiat lux* of *Genesis* not just by frequently reproducing the primal light, but through the trope of the window[44]. Since obviously no window appears in *Genesis*, Miller must be thinking of the window as a symbolic

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up the words, and seal the book, to the time of the end: many shall run to and fro, and knowledge shall be increased". "The Book of Daniel," in *Old Testament*, XII 1-4.

[44] Miller, "Literature as Virtual Reality," 32.

passage of light. The window certainly features prominently in innumerable openings; in the modernist period, for instance, in such central novels as D. H. Lawrence's *Women in Love* (1920), Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1927), and *Mrs Dalloway* (1925)[45]. What may sustain Miller's idea is that the window is often illuminated by a beam of light, as we see in the openings by the experimental modernist Valery Larbaud:

> Le soleil qui vient tout droit jaillit à travers les lames de la persienne ; c'est bon, de pouvoir laisser la fenêtre ouverte toute la nuit, à ce commencement de novembre".
>
> Valery Larbaud: *Amants, heureux amants* (1923 [1921])

> Le reflet de la porte vitrée du parloir passa brusquement sur le sable de la cour, à nos pieds.
>
> Valery Larbaud: *Fermina Marquez* (1911)

In both these instances, however, the window does not support the trope of light. The brutality of the sun light is on the contrary *alleviated* by the narrator. In the first instance, the direct and otherwise unswerving light is regulated by the slatted shutter and, in the second instance, the light is reflected on the parlor and into the very heart of the human dwelling – the courtyard – where it even throws itself at the feet of the narrator. Rather than borrowing the authority of the divine light to open the novel, windows and doors rather emphasize the human manipulation and subjugation of that light in the resolve to begin.

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[45] D. H. Lawrence and Eugene M. Kaufmann, *Women in love* (New York: Quality Paperback Book Club, 1920); Virginia Woolf, *To the lighthouse* (London: L. & V. Woolf at the Hogarth Press, 1927); Virginia Woolf and S. Foster Damon, *Mrs. Dalloway* (New York,: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1925).

The window is however used precisely to support the idea of the opening as a threshold. Rather than marking the absolute beginning of the *fiat lux*, the window serves as a narrative "Janus-head" looking both back and forth – or inside and outside. Rather than imitating an absolute beginning, the window indicates a deliberate transition from one sphere to another. Two openings that exemplify this phenomenon are D. H. Lawrence's *Women in Love* (1920) and Le Clézio's *Le Procès verbal* (1963)[46]:

> Ursula and Gudrun Brangwen sat one morning in the windowbay of their father's house in Beldover, working and talking.
>
> D. H. Lawrence: *Women in Love* (1920)

> Il y avait une toute petite fois, pendant la canicule, un type qui était assis devant une fenêtre ouverte...
>
> Le Clézio : *Le Procès verbal* (1963)

In both examples, the window smoothes the entry into the literary work by marking a natural threshold between the reader's outside world and the fictional universe that is now being introduced. The window moreover creates a frame around the protagonists, as if it were a *tableau vivant* that could accompany the reader in the reading. In *Women in Love*, the window bay finally serves to initiate the novel's central theme by emphasizing the threshold between the secluded house of the protagonists' father and the outside world that awaits them as they fall in love.

It is furthermore important to notice that both *Women in Love* and *Le Procès verbal* exhibit a temporal structure, which does not evoke *Genesis*, but rather another well-known structure: the classic, fairytale opening "once upon a time". In *Women in Love*, "one morning" is

[46] Lawrence and Kaufmann, *Women in love*; Jean-Marie Gustave Le Clézio, *Le procès verbal* (Paris: NRF Gallimard, 1963).

a neat way of combining a novelistic realism with the temporal structure of "once upon a time"[47]. Le Clézio imitates the classic opening more directly, but adds the diminutive "toute petite", which strikes the reader as rather odd. The odd diminutive seems moreover to function in two conflicting ways: First, the diminutive adds a redundancy, which enhances the puerile aspect of the fairytale opening. Yet the diminutive simultaneously lessens the fantastic and grandiose aspect of the storytelling and prepares the reader for a common, quotidian tale, further confirmed by the mundane "canicule", "dog days".

From these examples, I maintain that the evocation or imitation of *Genesis* simply functions like the evocation of other familiar structures such as "once upon a time". The familiarity of the chosen opening component serves first of all to allow an opening to clear its own space and establish a relation of credibility *vis-à-vis* the reader. In all the above examples, this imitative practice does not venerate the established opening phrase, but rather tends to reduce it to a "cliché", in the sense both of a trivial formula and a stereotype for generating openings.

Certainly, God's *fiat lux* – "Let there be light" – accentuates that beginnings depend on an illocutionary act. Beginnings are not performed *by* language, as some theorists would say, but they are certainly performed *in* language. "In the beginning was the Word [*logos*], and the Word was with God", as St Johns Gospel opens. This performative aspect is present in all beginnings because they depend on an authority in order to be accepted *as* a beginning[48]. Unlike "holy scriptures", whose authority within a sect or religion is never questioned, the literary beginning will however have to strive for its authority to begin. It can strive for this authority in a number

[47] I discuss the function of the opening "once upon a time…" at length from page 90 in chapter 2.

[48] The performativity of beginnings will be discussed in chapter 2.

of ways. One obvious way is to borrow its authority from an already existing, authoritative beginning such as the Bible's and through the trope of cosmological creation establish the necessary literary myth of beginning. I have shown, however, that a literary opening is rather searching for its own authority by appealing to a familiar structure, which it transforms creatively in order to appeal concurrently to the reader's credulity and curiosity.

The analogy between cosmology and a book's inaugural power is therefore not as straightforward as some would expect. The literary analogy with *Genesis* turns out to be more accurately a rivalry or a revision of it. The specificity of the literary beginning stems rather from a combination of eagerness and hesitation in the struggle against the creative weight of preceding authorities. We remember for instance how Goethe's *Faust* feels impeded by the opening of the Gospel:

> Geschrieben steht: 'Im Anfang war das Wort!'
> Hier stock ich schon! Wer hilft mir weiter fort?
> (Written is: 'In the beginning was the Word!'
> Here I falter! Who helps me to go on?)[49]

This intimidation is of course subject to historical variation. In modernist "books of hours" such as Rainer Maria Rilke's *Stunden-Buch* (1899) and Paul Valéry's *Alphabet* (1924-29)[50], we therefore observe more explicitly the intrinsically palimpsestic quality of literature, which tries to outmaneuver the metaphysical weight of the literary creation by duplicating it[51]. Even if

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[49] Goethe, *Faust*. My translation.

[50] Rainer Maria Rilke, *Das Stunden-Buch* (Teddington, Middelsex: The Echo Library, 2008 [1899]); Paul Valéry, *Alphabet* (Paris: LGF - Livre de Poche, 1999).

[51] Gérard Genette was the first to suggest this palimpsestic quality of modern literature, see Gérard Genette, *Palimpsestes - La littérature au second degré* (Paris: Seuil, 1982).

cosmological creation myths no longer have their foundational property, a text will have to create a beginning of its own.

THE NATURAL BEGINNING AND THE AUTHORITY OF THE LITERARY OPENING

The question is now whether a literary text, if it tends to subvert the weight of cosmologies, could instead establish its authority by locating other beginnings. If, for instance, we revert to the ancient Greek conception of narrative, we notice that Greek reason views narratives as committed to "begin at the beginning". The famous "*logos*" that we associate with the Greek sense of rationality simply refers also to a presupposition that a narrative takes a certain direction[52]. Using the *logos* requires that the speaker be committed to speaking "straight" and to telling how the "whole thing" started[53]. It is only by beginning at the beginning that a speaker will be able to summarize what happened in a way that will present the chain of events in its various dimensions without leading anyone astray. Conversely, it is only through the decision not to hide or distort anything that a speaker will be able to set out from the premises of the affair itself and avoid obfuscating the narrative by beginning with his or her own perspective. In other words, a narrative involves explaining how the current situation *came about*, or as Hesiod puts it in his *Theogony* (800-700 BC), the current state will need to be presented in the light of its "natural" beginning[54].

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[52] Rémi Brague, "Le récit du commencement. Une aporie de la raison grecque," in *La Naissance de la raison en Grèce: Actes du colloque de Nice mai 1987*, ed. Jean-François Mattéi (Paris: PUF, 1990), 23.

[53] Ibid., 24.

[54] Hesiod, "The Theogony," in *The Theogony, Works and Days, and The Shield of Heracles* (Stilwell, KS: Digireads, 2008), v. 156, 203, 408, 25, 52.

Hesiod's line extends itself into Aristotle's celebrated thoughts on the structure of tragedy in the *Poetics* (384-322 BC). Having described "a whole" as "that which has a beginning, a middle and a conclusion", the *Poetics* defines a beginning as "that which itself does not of necessity follow something else, but after which there naturally is, or comes into being, something else"[55]. In other words, the beginning cannot be deduced from what preceded it. The middle and the conclusion, however, should follow from the beginning, and nothing else should follow the conclusion. This logical demarcation of the artwork precisely sets up a "cosmological" parallel that renders mimetic representation possible. A plot must therefore not begin "from a random point"[56] – the beginning ought to be "natural"[57].

The Greek appeal to "natural" beginnings may seem both rational and commonsensical, yet, to begin at the beginning is not as simple as it sounds. As the Greeks themselves were aware[58], the commitment to finding a "natural" beginning involves a conceptual obstacle. Going back to a state of affairs prior to the present involves *logically* restoring things as they *physically* were. This exercise is not easy – and for two reasons: first, it would practically require the speaker to relinquish his or her present perspective. Yet, it is only through the present perspective that he or she will be able to focus on the direction and move through the sequence

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[55] Aristotle, "Poetics," in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed. Vincent B. Leitch (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001), 96.

[56] Ibid.

[57] Aristotle's ultimate interest, however, lies in the *telos*, in the "final cause" and its means of persuasion as effected through emotion and style as well as through argumentation. The *logos* thus ultimately serves the artwork's resolution: "the end is most important of all" (ibid., 95.), which explains Aristotle's deep preoccupation with patterns of resolution like *peripeteia* (resolution by reversal of the protagonist's position) and *anagnorisis* (resolution by the protagonist's recognition of his or her fate). I will discuss resolution and *telos* below in chapter 2 and 3.

[58] Brague, "Le récit du commencement. Une aporie de la raison grecque," 29.

of events as they happened. Second, when locating a beginning one could theoretically extend the search infinitely backwards.

It is therefore also significant that in the *Theogony*, which is both a cosmogony and a description of the birth of the various gods, Hesiod uses the superlative of "first" only twice[59]. In this way he singles out two beginnings of fundamental importance: The first superlative beginning is when Hesiod began his career as a poet: "this word [logos] first the goddesses said to me" (l. 24) and the second is when the muses are asked to tell how the cosmos first began from primal chaos (l. 115-6), quite similarly to *Genesis* in its second interpretation (B) above. In Hesiod's textual middle ground between allegory and mythology, both superlative beginnings accentuate the narrative mediation and the interdependency of beginning and narration, which is also manifest in the opening of *Theogony*:

> From the Heliconian Muses let us begin to sing, who hold the great and holy mount of Helicon…
>
> Hesiod: *Theogony* (~700 BC)[60]

THE INFINITE REGRESS OF THE BEGINNING

The conceptual obstacle in tracing "the beginning" as an analogy to a cosmological beginning is addressed by Paul Valéry in his famous, but often misread aphorism "Au commencement était la fable" (1929)[61]:

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[59] Hesiod, "The Theogony," v. 24 and 116.

[60] This analogy is further heightened by the fact that Hesiod himself is from Ascra at the bottom of the Helikon Mountains: his own origin marks the beginning of the narrative.

[61] Paul Valéry, *Œuvres*, ed. Jean Hytier, vol. I, Pléiade (Paris: Gallimard, 1957). 394. Valéry continually altered this opening in provocative ways, for instance, in the opening of *Alphabet*, which reads "Au commencement était le sommeil" and the ironic "Au commencement était la Blague" (written in 1907 in *Cahiers IV* and quoted by the *Petit*

> Au commencement était la fable
> Nécessairement. Car ce qui fût est esprit, et n'a de propriétés qui ne soient pas de l'esprit;
> Donc, si tu imagines remonter vers le 'commencement', tu ne peux l'imaginer qu'en te dépouillant, à chaque recul un peu plus, de ce que tu sais par expérience, ou du moins par des témoignages qui se font de plus en plus rares. Et tu es obligé pour concevoir ces tableaux de plus en plus éloignés, de les compléter de plus en plus par ta production propre de personnages, d'événements et de théâtres.
> À la limite, il n'y a plus que du toi. C'est tout du toi : fable pure.

By recasting the opening of St John's Gospel with "fable" rather than "logos", Valéry insinuates that God's definitive illocutionary act of creation rests conceptionally on a "fable" in the sense of both an instructive story and a creative lie[62]. Tracing a beginning becomes a fable or a narrative, which will depend on a willingness to "strip" oneself ("se dépouiller") of accumulated experiences and to "peruse" oneself (a different meaning of "se dépouiller") in order to locate elements that can make up for the ever fading representation of the past moment. In the end, then, nothing is left but the individual's "production" of the past that makes up characters, events, scenes, thereby giving the word "representation" its full theatrical meaning: The past is staged in the mind. In other words, the beginning does in fact "begin" only when we begin to imagine it[63].

Robert under the entry "fable". See the entry "Fable," in *Petit Robert*, ed. Josette Rey-Debove and Alain Rey (Paris: Dictionnaires Le Robert, 1994).

[62] According to the *Petit Robert*, "Fable." a "fable" can mean both: 1. Récit de fiction dont l'intention est d'exprimer une vérité générale. 2. Anecdote mensongère. The English word "fib" is for instance an abbreviation of the obsolete expression a "fible-fable". Ibid.

[63] "L'origine est, en tout, imaginaire", Paul Valéry, *Cahiers*, vol. XXIII (Paris: C.N.R.S.). 592. *Cahiers*. Cf. "origine est une illusion". Paul Valéry, *Œuvres*, ed. Jean Hytier, vol. II, Pléiade (Paris: Gallimard, 1960). 1451.

The presumed firmness of the past is hence illusory because *necessarily* contingent upon the present, as indicated in the incomplete phrase "Nécessairement." that opens Valéry's aphorism. A beginning does not secure a constancy or a foundation, but on the contrary leads only to the individual's present potentiality: the pursuit of a secure beginning only leads to a creative beginning. Valéry finds that every thought of an origin will inescapably contain the present moment as its reference frame; we always look to the origin to explain something present to us in this very moment: "toute pensée de l'origine des choses n'est jamais qu'une rêverie de leur disposition actuelle, une manière de dégénérescence du réel, une variation sur ce qui est"[64].

The strangely vocative "nécessairement" from "Au commencement était la fable" reappears in Valéry's reflection on Edgar Allen Poe's "Eureka". Here Valéry affirms that a beginning is *necessarily* established by coincidence, by an imaginative co-incidence of all and nothing:

> Quant à l'idée d'un commencement – j'entends d'un commencement absolu – elle est nécessairement un mythe. Tout commencement est coïncidence ; il nous faudrait concevoir ici je ne sais quel contact entre le tout et le rien. En essayant d'y penser on trouve que tout commencement est conséquence, tout commencement achève quelque chose[65].

A beginning cannot be absolute – that would be a "myth", a "fable" – because it consists in the span between full existence ("le tout) and an imagination of nothingness ("le rien")[66]. Imagining

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[64] "Au sujet d'Eurêka" in Valéry, *Œuvres*, I: 863.

[65] "Au sujet d'Eurêka", ibid., 863-64. This text is clearly meant to be read in relation to the above aphorism, as it ends by reiterating: "Et quant à son origine, - Au commencement était la fable. Elle y sera toujours." (867)

[66] Or as Hegel would have expressed it: "Der Anfang enthält also beides, Sein und Nichts; ist die Einheit von Sein und Nichts, oder ist Nichtsein, das zugleich Sein, und Sein, das zugleich Nichtsein ist", quoted in George Steiner, *Grammars of Creation* (London: Faber and Faber, 2001). 196.

a beginning will however necessitate that something else comes to an end. A beginning will not be a foundation, but instead follows from and completes another enterprise.

In several respects, Valéry's analysis of the beginning anticipates the explicit 20th century critique of origins, which contemporary readers will tend to associate with the rise of literary theory and, more particularly, with the poststructuralism of Michel Foucault[67]. In *Les Mots et les choses* (translated to English as *The Order of Things*) from 1966, Foucault shows how beginnings taken as origins have become unexpectedly indeterminate as they only highlight the finitude of the human potential[68]. Locating an origin will naturally help fill in the gap between the present and the past, yet, in this recuperative project, the origin itself typically recedes still further. In the attempt to bring knowledge closer to its own inception, the recovery of the beginning will therefore tend to alienate us, just as Valéry described it.

According to Foucault, 18th century philosophy still imagined an origin to be a sort of "tableau" based on what he calls the "ideal genesis" of representation. From the 19th century, however, "une telle origine n'est plus concevable"[69]. Instead, human beings can only locate their origin "sur un fond de déjà commencé" and the origin therefore fails to constitute a true beginning:

> [Man] is never contemporaneous with that origin which is outlined through the time of things even as it eludes the gaze; when he tries to define himself as a

[67] We notice that Valéry asks not what a beginning is, but instead how we think of one. "Que nous faut-il, en effet, pour penser à cette origine ?", "Au sujet d'Eurêka", Valéry, *Œuvres*, I. . In his *Beginnings*, Edward Said draws heavily on Foucault in precisely this respect. Said, *Beginnings*. I discuss Said later in chapter 3, in the section called "Said's Beginnings: The Elusive Opening" on page 30.

[68] In the chapter "The Retreat and Return of the Origin" in Michel Foucault, *The order of things an archaeology of the human sciences*, Routledge classics (London: Routledge, 2001). 358-71. Translated from the section "Le Recul et le retour de l'origine." In Michel Foucault, *Les mots et les choses* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966).

[69] Foucault, *Les mots et les choses*: 340.

> living being, he can uncover his own beginning only against the background of a life which itself began long before him[70].

By making us rely upon events that necessarily preceded the knowledge of the individual, origins instead endow us with a sense of belatedness, which ultimately encumber our own potential for radical beginnings.

Valéry also describes this alienating belatedness in a small manuscript from 1921, where Orpheus' mythical creativity sets off only when the past fades and becomes inconceivable:

> Commencement d'Orphée
> – je suis né sans le savoir, sans le vouloir, vers ce temps qui est devenu fabuleux, et qui est si vieux qu'il passe pour n'avoir pas été. C'est là la façon dont le temps vieillit : non seulement il n'est plus, mais il n'est plus concevable et il semble impossible qu'il ait été[71].

Orpheus does not know his origin, his birth, which has instead entered into the time of fables. His origin lies entirely outside time; it belongs not just to a time that no longer exists, but to a time that is no longer conceivable. This was precisely Foucault's expression – the origin is no longer conceivable. Yet in the void exists also the conditions of future conception, or as Valéry expresses it: "ce chaos inconcevable est ordonné à mon dessein de concevoir. J'ai moi-même

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[70] Ibid., 341. Translated in ", Foucault, *The order of things an archaeology of the human sciences*: 350.

[71] Paul Valéry, "Commencement d'Orphée," in *Lake Collection 9.2* (University of Texas at Austin, Harry Ransom Center, 1921).

brouillé les cartes, afin de pouvoir débrouiller"[72]. It is when we lose the sense of origin that we endeavor to initiate our own beginnings[73].

DIFFERENTIATING ORIGINS FROM BEGINNINGS

This discussion of Valéry and Foucault points to the necessity of differentiating *origins* from beginnings more generally speaking. Indeed, when we think of beginnings, we may not have noticed that two directly opposed ideas are at stake: On the one hand, a beginning can be thought of as a capacity to commence something new and undertake an initiative. A beginning in this sense serves as an internal indication of change, which helps to underline the agent's essential freedom and potential, no matter how small the enterprise: "I begin to walk", "I begin this chapter", etc.

On the other hand, a beginning can be read as the external event that originally constituted an object, situation, or being (e.g. "modernity began with the industrialization", "the beginning of the universe", etc.). A beginning thus traces and institutes an *origin*, thereby allowing us to make sense of the way that we, or something, ended up in the present place. Understood as origin, a beginning is intended to provide explanation. This in turn circumscribes our present potential: such a beginning is meant to *determine* the present situation.

In other words, beginnings confront us with, on the one hand, a radical contingency – through the will to act and conceive – and, on the one hand, a reassuring determinism – through the desire to explain and resolve. Part of the effectiveness of the opening of *Genesis* can in effect

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[72] "Au sujet d'Eurêka", Valéry, *Œuvres*, I: 863.

[73] This idea is also proposed by Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative*: 6. However Brooks' account differs in important ways from mine, as I discuss in chapter 3, p. 123.

be explained by the fact that it contains both kinds of beginnings. God began creating the universe, but God's beginning is in the Judeo-Christian tradition also thought to be the beginning of the universe. In *Genesis,* God's active potential and the humans' passive explanation of the beginning of all things coincide.

Despite their divergent implications, these two aspects of beginnings – let me call them "a start" and "an origin" – are surprisingly easy to confuse, especially in English where "beginning" is both a noun (e.g. "the beginning") and a participle (e.g. "she is beginning"). After all, their major difference lies in its temporal positioning. A start could be seen as what one day could constitute the origin of something or someone, just as God's start is taken as the origin of the human race. Origins could be described as insights into a previous moment's starting potentialities that were now 'closed' and determined by time's passing.

How closely these two aspects of beginnings – starts and origins – are associated is in fact a matter of considerable historical fluctuation. Indeed, eras with a limited belief in genuine change tend to conflate the distinction altogether. In the Middle Ages, for instance, the two aspects of beginnings seemed almost inseparable due to a readiness conceptually to encompass each and every conception under one instigating act of creation[74]. A start was consequently perceived more like an origin in present time as it did not indicate a window of change, but instead a continuation of a previous motion[75]. In contrast, modern writers tend to differentiate

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[74] Smith, *The Book of the Incipit*: xx.

[75] Since Augustin follows the idea that there is no fundamental distinction between past, present and future. See "The Memory of the Beginning", Augustine, *The Confessions of St. Augustine*.: "je m'apprête à chanter un air que je connais. Avant de commencer, c'est mon attente qui se fixe sur l'ensemble de l'oeuvre; mais, dès que j'ai commencé, à mesure que les parties prélevées sur mon attente deviennent du passé, c'est ma mémoire qui se tend vers elles; et ainsi les forces vives de mon activité se trouvent distendues entre deux pôles: la mémoire – en raison de ce qui est déjà proféré – et l'attente – en raison de ce qui va l'être. Et cependant mon attention est là, présente, elle par qui transite le futur pour se faire passé".

sharply between starts and origins, especially in the 20th century where the differentiation was a prerequisite to a systematic critique of origins. In this way Foucault is careful to set apart origins from beginnings generally, which he instead characterizes as the *termini a quo* (e.g. temporal thresholds) of temporal events.

BEGINNINGS AND THE HUMAN SCIENCES

The distinction between these two forms of beginnings does in fact play a pivotal role in the formulation of the human sciences in the 20th century. It stands for instance at the very heart of the poststructuralist rejection of a foundational, humanist interpretation. In the seminal text "La Structure, le signe et le jeu", Jacques Derrida associates the notion of origin closely with humanism's traditional metaphysical or "onto-theological" perspective[76]. The distinction between "start" and "origin" could therefore explain what Derrida in this text pinpoints as the fundamental divide in the human sciences. Whereas the human sciences traditionally sought interpretations that served as origins and thus put "an *end* to the [interpretative] game", the alternative mode of interpretation, which Derrida clearly advocates, is no longer concerned with reassuring origins, but attempts instead to go beyond humanism by "affirming the game"[77]. Beginnings that do not "end" semantically are hence used anti-theologically.

The theoretical approach to literary openings is in this respect just as important and illustrative as any other beginning. Members of the so-called Geneva-school in the 1950's and

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[76] Jacques Derrida, "La structure, le signe et le jeu dans le discours des sciences humaines," in *L'écriture et la différence* (Paris: Seuil, 1967), 427.

[77] Ibid. (My italics).The game of beginning is precisely what Derrida practices in his analysis of Francis Ponge's short poem "Fable": Par le mot par commence ce texte / Dont la première ligne dit la vérité, / Mais ce tain sous l'une et l'autre / Peut-il être toléré ? / Cher lecteur déjà tu vois / Là de nos difficultés...

1960's have for instance attempted to relocate origins in literature by seeing them in the extratextual form of authorial consciousness[78]. It is in this light that Georges Poulet in his *Le Point de Départ* interprets Paul Valéry as a whole cosmological system: "Comme il y eut lors de la Genèse un moment fabuleux premier qui fut celui de la création, il faut bien [chez Valéry] qu'à chaque instant il y ait de nouveau un début absolu, celui où […] l'esprit qui reprend conscience se trouve en présence de tout ce qu'il peut recommencer de faire exister"[79]. Poulet's friend and heir, Hillis Miller, was in fact the first American to write on literary openings when in 1958 he wrote a chapter on the opening of Dickens' *Bleak House*, which I analyzed earlier in this chapter (on page 22)[80]. Miller's analysis is not as such a stylistic one, but focuses instead on the spatial and temporal location of the reader. In accordance with Poulet's phenomenological criticism, Miller treats the opening of *Bleak House* as an origin, as a mental moment gathering momentum and spreading through the rest of the novel: "The entire novel seeks to explain, by a retrospective reconstruction going counter to the forward movement of the novel, how the world came to be in the befogged, mud-soaked, fragmented, and decomposed state presented in the initial paragraphs"[81]. The initial detachment of characters and spaces serve as pieces that simply need to be put together: "In a sense all the novel is present in the initial moment and is only explicated or pieced together by the events which follow"[82]. From Poulet and Miller's vocabulary we sense that the literary work is treated almost theologically – the opening is really

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[78] For further details see my encyclopedia entry on Poulet: Niels Buch-Jepsen, "Georges Poulet," in *Encyclopedia of Modern French Thought*, ed. Christopher John Murray (New York/London: Fitzroy Dearborn, 2004).

[79] Georges Poulet, *Le point de départ* (Paris: Plon, 1964). 13.

[80] J. Hillis Miller, "Chapter VI: Bleak House," in *Charles Dickens: The World of his Novels* (Cambridge MA: Harvard UP, 1958). It is worth noting that Miller's book is dedicated to Poulet.

[81] Ibid., 168.

[82] Ibid.

an authorial genesis[83]. As was clear from my own analysis of *Bleak House*, Miller fails to apprehend Dickens' ironic play on religious connotations. Instead the work is seen as a perfect parallel to cosmological creation, which elevates, first, the work to a world onto itself and, second, the author to a creating consciousness of a conspicuously theological sort.

It is in this context that Derrida's anti-theological vocabulary should be read. We tend to think of Derrida, Foucault and also Barthes as essentially anti-biographical theorists, but their anti-theological vocabulary indicates that we should think of them principally as anti-phenomenological thinkers[84]. The central schism in 20th century human sciences can hence be explained as a controversy over how to understand beginnings. Valéry and later Foucault, Derrida and other theorists of the human sciences wish to separate the connotations of "origin" from the concept of "beginning" in order to release the present human potential through its own beginnings. The ironic consequence is however that they need to take the human dependence upon origins more seriously than if they did not wish to make this sharp distinction. The beginning that they envisage is precisely based on a renunciation of the dependency upon origins. Foucault, for instance, portrays origins as both alienating and inescapable, a frustrating

[83] The Geneva School is of course not the first to propose this idea of the authorial genesis. Wordsworth's *Prelude* (1798-1850) is typically interpreted in this way, for instance by Nuttall, *Openings*: 144.: "the matter of The Prelude is the growth of the poet's mind … In this, Genesis and the poem's inception can be one". Unsurprisingly, Marcel Proust was a central source of inspiration to the Geneva-critics.

[84] A closer inspection of Barthes' manifesto-like "Death of the Author" reveals for instance that the notion of author is not to be dismissed altogether. Rather, the notion is to be freed from theologically loaded concepts, e.g. "origin". Roland Barthes, "La mort de l'auteur," in *Œuvres complètes II*, ed. É. Marty (Paris: Seuil, 1994 [1968]). I discuss Barthes in more detail in chapter 3 from page 146.

dynamics that will elicit human creativity[85]. The renunciation of the origin is in this way a narrative that sets new beginnings in motion.

THE MAKE-BELIEVE OF A BEGINNING

Through this analysis of beginnings, I hope to have illustrated that there can be no beginning independently of the particular narrative we bring to it. In the recent past one can hardly discern a beginning from the event itself: "I started reading this book" is at times indistinguishable from "I am reading this book". Yet, the beginning labels the event, and this is crucial because epistemologically speaking we never describe an event as such, but always present an event under a certain description. Sartre is therefore only half right, or half wrong, when in his *la Nausée* (1938) he writes that "in life there is never any beginning"[86]. In life there are temporal events, but a beginning is an event under a certain description that needs to be established. That does not imply that beginnings are pure fictions; they exist in time, but simply cannot be located independently of us[87]. It is, for instance, not enough to explain a beginning by the temporal interval between a beginning and an end: that interval simply cannot be defined without the description of the interval itself. In other words, a beginning requires a supporting narrative, which can describe the beginning *as* event. At the logical scale, it can be observed that a beginning already contains narrative components because, as analytic philosophers have shown,

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[85] An example of this is: "Ce n'est plus l'origine qui donne lieu à l'historicité; c'est l'historicité qui dans sa trame même laisse se profiler la nécessité d'une origine qui lui serait à la fois interne et étrangère". Foucault, *Les mots et les choses*: 340.

[86] Jean-Paul Sartre, *La nausée* (Paris: Gallimard, 1938). 57.

[87] I here argue against Nuttall who claims that beginnings can be located independently of us. Nuttall, *Openings*: 201-08.

sentences that include beginnings will automatically be narrative sentences[88]. When undertaking a beginning, we must therefore begin, not at "the beginning", but by the description in which we wish to place the event.

"To begin at the beginning" is therefore at best a useless tautology. When the befuddled white rabbit in *Alice in Wonderland* asks where to begin his account, and the King of Hearts very gravely orders him to "begin at the beginning […] and then go on till you come to the end: then stop", we easily pick up on this tautological humor[89]. Despite the evident truth of the King's suggestion, the rabbit is no better off: because where does the account indeed begin? Under what description does the account, and hence its beginning, fall? Without this descriptive component, the beginning eludes us – just as it did to Valéry and Foucault. A beginning simply cannot be understood in itself, or as Hegel puts it, a beginning is "an unfulfilled immediacy which cannot be analyzed [Nichtanalysierbar]"[90]. In other words, a beginning is what philosophers call an epistemological "primitive" – a building block, which cannot or should not be scrutinized, and on which other knowledge is therefore constructed.

For this reason, the inaccessibility of the beginning and its dependency on a narrative component do not discard the human reliance on beginnings. On the contrary, "Men can do nothing without the make-believe of a beginning", as we learn in the first line of George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* (1876), which I chose as the epigraph of this chapter[91]. Let us look more closely at Eliot's striking opening:

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[88] Arthur Danto, *Analytical Philosophy of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965). 157. "Each of these terms, to be true of an event E-1, logically requires the occurrence of an event temporally later than E-1, and sentences making use of such terms in the obvious way will then be narrative sentences."

[89] Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland* (New York: Norton, 1992 [1865]).

[90] Hegel, quoted in Steiner, *Grammars of Creation*: 22.

[91] George Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, 2002 Modern Library pbk. ed. (New York: Modern Library, 2002).

> Men can do nothing without the make-believe of a beginning. Even Science, the strict measurer, is obliged to start with a make-believe unit, and must fix on a point in the stars' unceasing journey when his sidereal clock shall pretend that time is at Nought. His less accurate grandmother Poetry has always been understood to start in the middle; but on reflection it appears that her proceeding is not very different from his; since Science, too, reckons backwards as well as forwards, divides his unit into billions, and with his clock-finger at Nought really sets off *in medias res*. No retrospect will take us to the true beginning; and whether our prologue be in heaven or on earth, it is but a fraction of that all-presupposing fact with which our story sets out.
>
> George Eliot: *Daniel Deronda* (1876)

Eliot's *credo* does not dismiss the human belief in beginnings; on the contrary, it is the very impossibility of arriving at a "true beginning" that prompts us to believe even more firmly in beginnings. We cannot be taken to the true beginning, but will have to rely on an "all-presupposing fact" that will set everything in motion. To Eliot, all human inquiry is "obliged to start with a make-believe unit" in order to measure other things and get its interpretation under way. In this way, all human endeavors in fact share some of its structure with literature, namely its narrative aspect. All modes of inquiry rely on their own narrative of beginning, and literature's more explicit reliance on make-believe therefore helps to conceptualize beginnings in general. What Eliot makes clear is that a beginning's *foundational* quality cannot be separated from its *fictional* quality. The designation of a beginning is a requirement of narrative, but a beginning in itself requires a narrative.

BIRTH AND THE COMPLICATION OF THE NATURAL BEGINNING

Greek reason may recommend locating a "natural" beginning, but as I have shown, the designation of such beginnings is highly problematic. In fact, I claim that literature has always shown resistance to the commonsensical approach to beginnings. If we revert to the oldest example of a critical assessment of a specific literary opening, we notice, for example, that it addresses precisely this problem of "natural" beginnings. In his *Ars Poetica*, Horace defies the Greek *logos* and eulogizes Homer for opening *in medias res* with:

> Sing, goddess, of the Wrath of Peleus' son Achilles
>
> Homer: *The Iliad* (~800 BC)

To Horace what makes Homer the greatest of poets is precisely that: "he doesn't (…) begin the Trojan War from the twin egg (*ab ovo*) [i.e. the conception of the twins Clytemnestra and Helen]"[92]. Inception does not begin by conception. To Horace, the *midway* becomes instead the very measure of the whole work: the poet "tells his fables and mixes truth with falsehoods in such a way that the middle squares with the beginning and the end with the middle"[93]. Horace's symmetrical dictum resounds throughout the history of composition, from Pierre de Ronsard's poetological advice "begin in the middle" to the famous opening of Dante's *Divine Comedy* (1307-21)[94]:

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[92] Horace, "Ars Poetica," in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed. Vincent B. Leitch (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001), 127. Moreover, Homer *tells* the Muse where to begin; he is not told himself.

[93] Ibid.

[94] Pierre de Ronsard, "From A Brief on the Art of French Poetry," in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed. Vincent B. Leitch (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001 [1565]). He further asserts that "great poems never begin at the first of the action". Dante, *Inferno*, trans. Allen Mandelbaum (New York: Bantam Books, 1982).

Halfway through the journey of my life

Dante Alighieri: *Divine Comedy* (1307-21)

In the Horacian line of thought, poetry should precisely show that the laws of art are unlike the laws of nature; this entails that the beginning of a poem should never fuse with an established beginning in nature.

So accepted was Horace's principle that Lord Byron's resolve to "begin at the beginning" in his *Don Juan* (1819-1824) could be nothing but deeply polemic:

> Most epic poets plunge "in medias res"
> (Horace makes this the heroic turnpike road),
> […]
> That is the usual method, but not mine –
> My way is to begin with the beginning;[95]

Lord Byron therefore opens by "narrating somewhat of Don Juan's father / And also of his mother, if you'd rather".

Yet, the problem about beginning "with the beginning" is that even what we think of as the most "natural" of beginnings, birth and conception, quickly turn *artificial* rather than *natural*. Intuitively, it seems natural to begin one's life story by one's birth. But, as Georges Perec explains in his semi-biographical text *Je suis né* (1990), there is in fact something deeply implausible about beginning a text by "I am born"[96]. To see what Perec means, let us look at the humor involved when Dickens' *David Copperfield* begins his narrative in precisely that way:

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[95] "Canto the first: VI-VII", Lord Byron, *Don Juan* (London: John Lehmann, 1949). 21.

[96] "Il est difficile d'imaginer un texte qui commencerait ainsi : Je suis né", Georges Perec, *Je suis né* (Paris: Seuil, 1990).

> I am born. Whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life, or whether that station will be held by anybody else, these pages must show. To begin my life with the beginning of my life, I record that I was born (as I have been informed and believe) on a Friday, at twelve o'clock at night. It was remarked that the clock began to strike, and I began to cry, simultaneously.
>
> Charles Dickens: *David Copperfield* (1849-50)

Dickens' opening looks like a number of realist biographical narratives which situate themselves through the time of the birth. A couple of examples are Alphonse Daudet's *L'Homme à la cervelle d'or* (1869) and Marcel Pagnol's *La gloire de mon père* (1957) with almost identical structures despite their historical disparity:

> Je suis né dans une petite ville de l'ancienne Souabe, chez le greffier au tribunal, un jour de soleil et de Pentecôte.
>
> Alphonse Daudet: *L'Homme à la cervelle d'or* (1869)

> Je suis né dans la ville d'Aubagne, sous le Garlaban couronné de chèvres, au temps des derniers chevriers.
>
> Marcel Pagnol: *La gloire de mon père* (1957)

The structure – birth-place and time of the birth – is so familiar that we immediately recognize it as an indication of an auto-biography. Yet, the narrative need not be a "real" autobiography; the narrative could be a piece of fiction, which lends its authority from the familiarity of the opening phrase.

The complication about beginning with "I am born" clearly stems from the use of present tense. Although it is standard in French to use the past participle about one's birth, it seems

deeply illogical because the past participle is the same as the present tense with an adjective. It is this logical inconsistency that Dickens plays on. By beginning with "I am born" in the absence of temporal and spatial indications, Dickens manages to blend an almost abstract birth with the humor involved in imagining that one could be present at one's own birth. When therefore the second line evokes an uncertainty about whom the hero of the narrator's life will be, we do also sense the presence of the narrator being born in the process and who now imagines whether the narration which in the third sense turns into past tense will ever move ahead as expected and recapture the present tense. The birth appears to be double: the narrator tells the tale of his birth ("I was born on a Friday"), but the narrator is also born to us as readers in present time.

The humor and implausibility of the opening passage lies in the fact that one cannot be present at one's own birth. The information that one will have of the birth could of course never have been obtained firsthand, and the narrator mitigates the provocative opening by adding, quite reasonably, that his information about the birth has been obtained through others. The irony continues, though, as the information he conveys is not a precise, spatial and temporal information, but the rather "useless" information that he was born "on a Friday" (who, after all, knows what day of the week they were born on?). The rather implausible coincidence that Copperfield started crying exactly as the clock struck 12 furthermore accentuates that the tale of his birth is reported through others and may not be meticulously accurate. Through this inaccuracy the tale gains a symbolic power; the birth may not serve as a beginning in itself, but when the clock strikes 12 at the moment of birth, the birth is supported structurally by the beginning of a new day. The authority of the birth is hence undermined by the assertive beginning, which corresponds with Copperfield's fatherless status, born exactly at 12 o'clock,

"at Nought", as Eliot wrote in the opening of Daniel Deronda, and whose witnesses to the birth need to be asserted rather than taken for granted.

What the opening of Copperfield shows is that even in saying "I", we rely upon previous tales, which together constitute our individuality. Without explicitly acknowledging these tales, we readily accept that we are the continuation of the individual who according to the record of our parents, or the registry office, was born at that precise time and in that precise place[97]. This was part of the insight of Valéry's "Commencement d'Orphée" (see above on page 35), which challenges the standardized and informative "je suis né" by opening: "je suis né sans le savoir…". This identity of the narrating subject is however at the center of narrative theory, to such a degree that Alain Robbe-Grillet in his analysis of Robert Pinget's *Mahu* (1952) claims that "un livre, ça se commence toujours par 'je suis né'"[98]. But Robbe-Grillet's surrender to these three words is not unproblematic. In his view, "the novel paradoxically ends in a whole collection of possible openings, which all begin by these three words, but in the end degenerate into a cacophony of shrieks, stammering, and incomplete sentences". Although "je suis né" is paradigmatic, this mode of opening not only stagnates but self-destructs: "Une fois de plus tout est à refaire".

This disintegration expresses a revolt against the idea that the textual beginning should serve as an origin by evoking a birth. Although Dickens' opening shows an awareness of the artificiality of the opening by a birth, it has nevertheless become emblematic of a traditional novelistic structure that politely begins by introducing the character through the social setting of

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[97] Umberto Eco, "Fictional Protocols," in *Six Walks in the Fictional Woods* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1994).

[98] Robert Pinget, *Mahu ou le Matériau* (Paris: Minuit, 1952). See Alain Robbe-Grillet's analysis of Pinget's novel, Alain Robbe-Grillet, "Un roman qui s'invente lui-même," in *Pour un nouveau roman* (Paris: Minuit, 1963 (c. 1961)), 111-12.

a birth. J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951) sets off precisely by evoking the exhaustion of Dickens' opening and reminds us of the social connotations of talking of one's birth:

> If you really want to hear about it, the first thing you'll probably want to know is where I was born, and what my lousy childhood was like, and how my parents were occupied and all before they had me, and all that David Copperfield kind of crap, but I don't feel like going into it.
>
> J. D. Salinger: *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951)

Here the rejection of "that David Copperfield kind of crap" precisely ensures the unsentimental authenticity of Salinger's narrator, who refuses to tell the reader about his parents because they are "touchy as hell". This breach of the Dickensian courtesy becomes the frame that sets the tone of Salinger's novel. The historical shift is also of great consequence. David Copperfield explains his origin, but plays with the logical inconsistency of the perspective, which makes his birth ironically natural. Salinger's novel treats the origin as forbidden or unreliable, which has the consequence that the novel is firmly placed in the verifiable present, which is also symptomatic of the historical periods to which Dickens and Salinger belong.

From the opening of *David Copperfield* we sense that there is something paradoxically abrupt about talking about one's beginning. The search for a natural beginning very easily turns inconsistent and therefore humorous, as we are further reminded by one of the most brilliant openings in literary history, that of Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* (1759) where the narrator begins by recounting how he was even *conceived*[99]:

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[99] Laurence Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy* (London: Penguin, 1967 [1759]).

> I wish either my father or my mother, or indeed both of them, as they were in duty both equally bound to it, had minded what they were about when they begot me.
>
> Laurence Sterne: *Tristram Shandy* (1759)

Sterne's opening is clearly positioned in the polemic about the Horacian dictum because Shandy soon exclaims: "right glad I am, that I have begun the history of myself in the way I have done; and that I am able to go on, tracing everything in it, as Horace says, ab Ovo"[100]. But of course Shandy has not proven that a story can successfully begin *ab ovo*. Rather he has taken the *ab ovo*-dictum *ad absurdum*, and thereby proves that the true *ab ovo*-beginning appears instead to begin *in medias res*.[101] It is important to realize however that the absurdity involved in the opening scene stems not from Shandy's narrative mode, but from his explanatory mode. As Nuttall has argued, Shandy's initial disorientation is established by commencing the retrospective counter-flow of explanation before the narrative flow has properly begun[102]. Furthermore the humor of the absurdity should not be forgotten; the humor precisely means that we as readers do not take the absurdity entirely seriously.

The absurdity of the narrative perspective in *David Copperfield* and *Tristram Shandy* does of course rely on the fact that they are both first-person narratives. It is clearly the presumed certainty of Copperfield's and Tristram's narrations that appears absurd: because *how* could they

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[100] Ibid., 4.

[101] The play on the absurdity of the narrative perspective is exploited even further by Carlos Fuentes when, in *Cristóbal Nonato*, the narrator is not even born at the beginning of the story. Carlos Fuentes, *Cristóbal Nonato* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1987).

[102] Nuttall, *Openings*: 158.

know?[103] One way that a first-person narrative can deal with the birth of the narrator without resorting to humor is by presenting the past through layers of uncertainty, for instance when the narrator of Jules Vallès' *L'Enfant* (1878) asks questions about his birth:

> Ai-je été nourri par ma mère ?
>
> Jules Vallès: *L'Enfant* (1878)

In contrast, third-person narratives deal more easily with the birth of the protagonist, as in these examples:

> There was a baby born named Ida.
>
> Gertrude Stein: *Ida* (1941)

> Seine Geburt war unordentlich, darum liebte er leidenschaftlich Ordnung, das Unverbrüchliche, Gebot und Verbot.
>
> Thomas Mann: *Das Gesetz* (1944)

> The first thing the midwife noticed about Michael K when she helped him out of his mother into the world was that he had a hare lip.
>
> J. M. Coetzee: *Life and Times of Michael K* (1983)

In such third-person openings, birth serves not just as the beginning of the narrative, but also typically as the naming of the protagonist.

When we consider the status of the natural beginning, we must therefore remember the notion of narrative perspective. A narration will always be narrated and the narrator will

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[103] Compare with the opening of Prældier by Peer Hultberg: "Imagine that, isn't it peculiar, but when I was born I was entirely covered by black hair". Peer Hultberg, *Prældier* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1990).

inevitably take on a perspective. Even an "objective" narrator adopts a perspective, namely that of an objective narrator, which restrains what can and what should be told. In other words, any narrator has not just a story to tell, but also a way of telling it. The belief in literature's dependency on natural beginnings seems to rest on a neglect of this fundamental difference between the narrator's story and the way that it is presented. The "internal" perspective of the narrator cannot conform to the "external" perspective of the event. The problem in the case of natural beginnings like birth and conception is that they necessarily belong to the "external" perspective, and the reason why we laugh at the openings of *David Copperfield* and *Tristram Shandy* is that they mix the external perspective of birth or conception – which we believe can be verified by observance – with the internal perspective of the narrator who reports the event. Pointing out the discrepancy between these two perspectives may in fact be one of literature's greatest achievements.

I have shown that, throughout literary history, the biological beginning has always been viewed with a great deal of suspicion and skepticism. The literary insight into narrative perspective has indicated an epistemological difficulty of explaining a beginning, which is accentuated in the case of biological beginnings, or as Milton's Adam in the Garden of Eden ponders:

> For Man to tell how human Life began
> Is hard; for who himself beginning knew?[104]

[104] John Milton and Gordon Teskey, *Paradise lost : authoritative text, sources and backgrounds, criticism*, A Norton critical edition (New York: W.W. Norton, 2005). VIII: 250-1.

The search for such biological beginnings will only end up in a dependency on other narration. Each beginning will not only have to be narrated, but will be a narration in itself. Whereas the "natural" beginning of birth and conception ends up seeming rather artificial, humorous, and deliberately ironic, a beginning that *limits* the perspective of the first-person narrator to the present seems sincere and intuitive, as in the case of the opening of *Jacquou le croquant*:

> Le plus loin que je me souvienne, c'est 1815, l'année que les étrangers vinrent à Paris...
>
> Eugène Le Roy: *Jacquou le croquant* (1899)

In this case, the first memory of the narrating consciousness also becomes the opening of the novel. This limits the opening's dependency on second-hand sources, and the explicit indication of the narrator's limits opens for a different standard of reliability.

The reason for these perspectival complications is that modern literature, especially with the rise of the novel, tends to tell the tale of one single individual. From Cervantes' *Don Quixote* (1605-15), the novel had had to adapt to the challenges of narrating life-stories, as if the individual is now a world in itself, needing its own cosmology. The problem is however that a life is not narratively cohesive. Aristotle, for instance, praises Homer precisely for not recounting all the things that happen to one person[105]. His explanation is that "[a] plot is not unified, as some suppose, if it concerns one single person. An indefinitely large number of things happens to one person, in some of which there is no unity. So too the actions of one person are many, but do not turn into a single action" (1451a). Nevertheless, modern literature, with its more subjectivist outlook, tends precisely to situate an individual within a plot and therefore investigates

[105] Aristotle, "Poetics," 1451a.

alternative ways of establishing unity – the unity that *David Copperfield* and *Tristram Shandy* deal with in ironic ways[106].

CONCLUSION: THE BEGINNING OF A STORY IS THE STORY OF A BEGINNING

The textual openings analyzed in this chapter tend to run counter to recognized, authoritative beginnings. This I see as a clear indication that the authority of textual beginnings depends not on a simulation of naturalness, but on an evocation of *familiarity* meant to appeal to the expectations of the reader. We saw, for instance, that the openings that evoke *Genesis* do not do so in order to borrow its authority, but rather because the cosmological beginning provides a familiar platform for presenting the text's own specific terms of fictionality. The echo of origin that we often find in literary openings is therefore not an imitation of the primordial creation, as Nuttall and Miller will have us think. Rather, such echoes mark the instigation of a newborn relation between text and the reader. If echoes from "natural" beginnings resound in literary beginnings, it is only because they can be heard by the reader.

This result is supported by this chapter's demonstration that unmediated beginnings are unknowable. Even our own beginning cannot be ascertained without relying on other narratives – and in this regard Racine's exclamation "ce que je sais le mieux, c'est mon commencement"

[106] This has earned *Tristram Shandy* the label as an important precursor to the modernist novel. I save a thorough discussion of the modernist novel for chapter 3. At this stage it is however important to indicate that the modernism frequently exhibits an explicitly anti-Aristotelian attitude (e.g. Fernando Pessoa, "Notes on a non-Aristotelian Aesthetics," in *Always astonished: selected prose* (San Francisco, CA: City Lights Books, 1988). Yet, the modernist novel in fact agrees with Aristotle with regard to the disunity of the single-person plot; the difference is simply that this disunity is not shunned, but intensely explored. One could therefore also add that the modernist novel treats the opening of the novel as a "start", not as an "origin", according to the distinction I made earlier in this chapter (on page 37).

would be misleading if read literally[107]. The inscrutability of beginnings instead calls for them to be narrativized, and in my analysis of Valéry I illustrated how a present start could be understood only as the abstract notion of origin begins to dissipate. I have argued that one's fundamental approach to beginnings – whether one sees them as "starts" or as "origins" – has profound epistemological and ideological consequences, which can be traced in the central 20th century divide in the humanities between 'theorists' and 'philologists'. Nevertheless, even a beginning that altogether defies the notion of origin will nevertheless have to establish its authority on an alternative narration. Therefore, when Virginia Woolf writes in *The Waves* (1931) that "[i]f there are no beginnings and endings there are no stories", we must not forget that the opposite also holds true[108]. If there are no stories, there are no beginnings.

The beginning of a story, whether cosmological or literary, will then also have to be the story of a beginning, a phenomenon that John Barth deliberately plays on in the opening of his *Lost in the Funhouse*:

> Once upon a time there was a story that began.
>
> John Barth: *Lost in the Funhouse* (1969)

Without this narrative aspect of beginnings, an infinite regress would develop. As I showed in my discussion of Valéry, the search for a beginning could extend infinitely backwards until the beginning becomes entirely unrecognizable and ineffectual. It is this infinite regress that Tristram Shandy explores through the absurd location of the moment of conception. Ultimately,

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[107] "What I know best is my own beginning", Racine, quoted as epigram by Louis Aragon, *Je n'ai jamais appris à écrire ou Les incipit* (Paris: Skira, 1969).

[108] Virginia Woolf, Molly Hite, and Mark Hussey, *The waves*, Annotated ed., A Harvest book (Orlando, Fla.: Harcourt, 2006). Quoted in Danto, *Analytical Philosophy of History*: 155.

only the origin of the world would do unless something stops the regress. And this something, I claim, can only be a narrative structure, which mediates the otherwise inaccessible beginnings[109].

My contention is therefore that "natural" beginnings are in fact "artificial" in the sense that they, like literary manifestations, depend on narrative components. I therefore recommend that we do not distinguish in essence between artificial and natural beginning, but rather between beginnings that are *internally* grounded and beginnings that are *externally* grounded, as I go on to pursue further in the next chapter. This does not imply, as Nuttall fears, that natural beginnings are being reduced to mere "cultural fictions" that we read *into* the world, but never *off* it[110]. In fact, Nuttall simply puts up a false dichotomy. When, for instance, we read the clock to indicate "1 o'clock", then "2 o'clock" etc., that does not entail that time passes independently of us. Likewise, we read beginnings into the world on the basis of real events since these help us structure an otherwise unsystematic collection of events. The narrative component that we add serves to enhance our ability to trace and define temporal beginnings and it is therefore a fundamental instrument in our understanding also of the natural world[111]. In this sense we comprehend life as if it were a fiction, but that does not of course make it a fiction. It is simply that, as Eliot puts it in her opening:

> Men can do nothing without the make-believe of a beginning.
>
> George Eliot: *Daniel Deronda* (1876)

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[109] I here argue against Nuttall, *Openings*: 210.

[110] Ibid., 195.

[111] Kant's noumenal philosophy proposes a similar explanation of beginning. See his "Third Antinomy" in Immanuel Kant, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*, Revised ed., Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004). Cf. Paule Levert, *L'Idée de commencement* (Paris: Aubier, 1961).

– CHAPTER 2 –

Initiating the Contract of Fiction:

A Theory of Openings

"The beginning, which is a god established in men, maintains all things"

Plato: *Laws* 775e

THE BAIT AND THE PERFORMATIVITY OF LITERARY OPENINGS

One of the most fascinating words in the French language is the verb "amorcer". Literally the verb means to put on bait – or more dramatically to load a weapon. Most frequently, however, the verb is used in its figurative sense where it means: "to initiate" or "to begin". That this concrete verb can gain such figurative meaning suggests one thing: any human endeavor begins by a kind of enticement and requires a means to lure someone in. To begin in this context involves both a subject that attracts and an object to attract.

This extraordinary verb overtly recognizes what I have previously called the "deceitful" nature of beginnings: the beginning is bait. The verb accentuates quite clearly that any beginning depends on an interaction – and in the literary scenario, the interaction in question is of course that between the author and the reader. The beginning of a book is a "threshold", as the opening of Edmond Jabès' *Le livre des questions* (1963) tells us, and we as readers must be lead on to ask

"what happens on the other side of this door?"[112]. The literary opening must therefore not only provide information enough to initiate the story; it must also "seduce" its reader into this form of communicative interaction. In other words, the beginning is, as Henry Fielding writes in his opening of *Tom Jones*, a "bill of fare to the feast"[113] – it should both inform us and tempt us. In fact, as I shall show in this chapter, literature is characterized precisely by a constant negotiation – or sometimes even *collision* – between the *informative* and the *seductive* principles[114].

"Amorcer" thus illustrates my general contention in this chapter that the literary opening – like any beginning – always contains a performative aspect. The opening calls for a response, which the reader is then lured into giving. It is this crucial initial contact at the threshold of the book that sets up what I would call "the contract of fiction". The opening sets up the narrative parameters of fiction such as perspective, tone, and focus – and, as I shall argue later in this chapter, these initial parameters determine also the conditions for closure. In order to illustrate this performative nature, I shall focus first on different types of narration – heterodiegetic, homodiegetic, covert, overt etc. – in order to discuss the performative signals of the literary opening. I then establish a sort of "taxonomy" of opening signals, which serves to show that the performative aspect is to be located mostly clearly in irony, which can be both textual and intertextual. In particular, I discuss the implicit or explicit relation to standard introductory formulae, such as "once upon a time…". I shall furthermore illustrate that a text may begin by indicating its status as fiction through the use of what I call "perspectival abruptness", which

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[112] Edmond Jabès, *Le livre des questions* (Paris: Gallimard, 1963).

[113] Fielding, *Tom Jones*.

[114] This distinction is inspired by Andrea del Lungo who points to the following four functions of the opening: commencer le texte (fonction codifiante), intéresser le lecteur (fonction séductive), mettre en scène la fiction (fonction informative); mettre en marche l'histoire (fonction dramatique). Andrea del Lungo, *L'Incipit romanesque* (Paris: Seuil, 2003).

renders the opening unordered from a narrative point of view. My intention is to argue that the equilibrium between narrative structure vs. narrative amorphousness is indicated at the beginning, not just by determining temporal aspects such as the use of *in medias res* and other temporal techniques such as prolepsis and analepsis[115], but by determining the use of pronouns and determiners, which locate the subjectivity of the narration. This is abruptness in the narrative *perspective*. I shall begin by using Gérard Genette's classic distinction between homodiegetic and heterodiegetic narration and between covert and overt narration in order to locate the performativity of the literary opening[116].

HOMODIEGETIC NARRATION

The opening's performative aspect seems most obvious in what narratologists following Genette call an "overt homodiegetic narration"; that is, roughly speaking, a narrative with an openly declared narrator who takes part in the narrative itself. An extreme example of this kind of narration is J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*, which I already discussed in chapter 1 (on page 49). Here the reader is directly addressed:

> If you really want to hear about it, the first thing you'll probably want to know is where I was born, and what my lousy childhood was like, and how my parents were occupied and all before they had me, and all that David Copperfield kind of crap, but I don't feel like going into it.
>
> J. D. Salinger: *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951)

[115] Gérard Genette, *Nouveau discours du recit* (Paris: Seuil, 1983).

[116] After Genette, ibid.

The opening line is surprising – and slightly contradictory. "Really" gives the impression that Holden, the narrator, knows and even has spoken with his reader, yet the conditional mood and the "probably" indicates that Holden does not after all know the reader. When Holden begins to refer to David Copperfield, it emerges that the reader is, after all, imagined – or "implicit", as the narratologists say. Salinger's opening therefore plays on the narrator's expectation of what an ordinary reader will expect to hear in a first-person narration. Holden talks intimately and even indecorously to the reader. His intractable voice scoffs at the ordinary readerly expectations, which in the end only increases the curiosity; what does Holden hide – and why does he hide it? This concealment of information is precisely what lures the reader on. Here the seductive principle thrives precisely by quelling the informative principle. The interaction between narrator and reader is immediate as the opening demands an almost direct response from the reader: "can you accept that I begin in this way although I flout the conventional *modus operandi* of openings?" From a communicative point of view, Salinger's opening furthermore flouts what linguists call the "cooperative principle", and I shall show in further detail that literature is what it is precisely because it sometimes simply refuses to "cooperate". In fact, that characteristic is part of the very "contract" we have with fiction.

It is not difficult to see why homodiegetic openings exhibit its pragmatic quality most clearly. A first-person narrator can more openly demand a response from the reader, as if it were a question: Do you accept the terms of this narration? The reader is in the way *initiated* and is actively invoked to "open" the literary work through his or her imagination. One illustrative example of the contractual first-person, homodiegetic opening is the famous opening of Melville's *Moby-Dick*:

> Call me Ishmael.
>
> Herman Melville: *Moby-Dick* (1851)

In this imperative, the narrator introduces himself directly and thereby calls for the reader's acceptance. The imperative works directly as a speech act and performs the role as a contractual conditional: if you accept to call the narrator by the given name, you have accepted the terms of the narration and you may enter the work[117]. This pragmatic contact – or, rather, contract – between the narrator and the reader functions in homodiegetic narrations like *Moby-Dick* and *The Catcher in the Rye* through an introduction of the narrator, whom the reader will first have to accept.

HETERODIEGETIC NARRATION

This does not mean, however, that the pragmatic aspect of a literary opening cannot be explicit in a *heterodiegetic* narration, i.e. a narration in which the narrator does *not participate* in the action, which is more typically a third-person narration. Even if the heterodiegetic narrator is essentially *covert*, the pragmatic aspect of the opening can still be highlighted through the narrator's appeal to the reader's spatial imagination, for instance like the opening question of Le Clézio's *Le livre des fuites*:

> Est-ce que vous pouvez imaginer cela? Un grand aéroport désert, avec un toit plat étendu sous le ciel, et sur ce toit, il y a un petit garçon assis sur une chaise

[117] Hillis Miller discusses this opening in a similar fashion. Yet, I have previously shown my disagreement with his general line of thought. Miller, "Literature as Virtual Reality."

> longue en train de regarder droit devant lui. L'air est blanc, léger, il n'y a rien à voir.
>
> Le Clézio: *Le Livre des fuites* (1969)

The question is not asked with the polite conditional "pourriez", but with the indicative "pouvez", which indicates that the appeal to imagination is also a question of capacity: *can* you imagine what the narrator tells you? The boy is quickly turned into the narration's focalizer and through his eyes we see that there is in fact nothing to be seen ("il n'y a rien à voir"). But the reader's role is here also explained through a metanarrative maneuver: the reader needs to accept the terms of the narration although strictly speaking there is "nothing to be seen". A novel is a "livre des fuites" ("a book of flights") in more than one sense; it is a flight of fancy, which requires something specific of the reader. The reader has to surrender blindly to the narration. Several novels make this condition clear to the reader, such as Irvin Faust's *Foreign Devils* and Wright Morris' *Cause for Wonder*:

> Well you cannot hold back any longer. Close your eyes, hold your nose, grab air and jump.
>
> Irvin Faust: *Foreign Devils* (1973)

> What led you, just now, to glance at this page? To make a beginning, right?
>
> Wright Morris: *Cause for Wonder* (1963)

My examination shows that the appeal to the reader's spatial imagination is particularly frequent when the destination is exotic and unfamiliar to the implicit reader. As in the case of the

above Le Clézio-novel, novels that begin in a colonial setting, for instance, tend to employ the pragmatic, heterodiegetic appeal, here Paul Scott's *The Jewel in the Crown*:

> Imagine, then, a flat landscape, dark for the moment, but even so conveying to a girl running in the still deeper shadow cast by the wall of the Bibighar Gardens an idea of immensity, of distance, such as years before Miss Crane had been conscious of standing where a lane ended and cultivation began.
>
> Paul Scott: *The Jewel in the Crown* (1966)

The authorial appeal to the reader's participatory imagination comes across as natural and continuous; the "then" in Scott's "Imagine, then," gives an impression of an imagination already activated; a reader who only needs to be drawn to the next image. In this sense, the "then" actually *dedramatizes* the burden of imagination because the process seems already to have begun. Yet, the "then" also gives the reader the impression of narrative *estrangement*: has the story already begun before I, the reader, started reading? So whose story is it, in the first place? And who is its expected audience – am I as reader included and active in it? Although the burden of beginning is dedramatized, these accompanying questions conversely *dramatize* the opening, especially since they are crucial markers of the colonial setting with its complex dynamics of appropriation. The impression that the act of imagination is already well under way at the beginning further allows the opening to launch a number of bewildering elements, such as the gardens and the girl who may or may not be "Miss Crane". At the same time, the opening draws up an image of some of the central themes of the novel: the protected garden and the shadows that it casts at the boundary of "cultivation".

The complex "then" from the opening line of *The Jewel in the Crown* occurs also in John Cheever's *Bullet Park* (1969), which goes even further in its appeal to the participation of the reader:

> Paint me a small railroad then, ten minutes before dark. Beyond the platform are the waters of the Wekonsett River, reflecting a somber afterglow. The architecture of the station is oddly informal, gloomy but unserious, and mostly resembles a pergola, cottage or summer house although this is a climate of harsh winters. The lamps along the platform burn with a nearly palpable plaintiveness. The setting seems in some way to be at the heart of the matter.
>
> John Cheever: *Bullet Park* (1969)

The opening maintains an odd balance between authorial informative precision ("the Wekonsett River", "this is a climate of harsh winters") and impressionism ("a nearly palpable plaintiveness", "in some way"). The overt narrator describes the initial setting quite elaborately, but nevertheless seems uninformed, or vague, with regard to the greater purpose of the description: "The setting seems in some way to be at the heart of the matter". Although the reader is evoked to help "paint" the railroad, the narrator suspects this to be the crucial place to begin. This discrepancy makes it unclear whether this opening is predominantly readerly or authorial. In my discussion of "perspectival abruptness" later in this chapter, I shall address the complexity of such indexical indicators as "then", which fail to make a clear semantic reference.

	Homodiegetic	Heterodiegetic
Covert narrator	Rare	Frequent*:* *e.g. Le Clézio*
Overt narrator	Frequent*:* *e.g. Melville*	Rare

Figure 1: The narrator: Covert/overt vs. homediegetic/heterodiegetic

In the last five openings from the mid-20th century, the reader is directly addressed. Such an address is of course not uncommon in the history of literature; the 18th century and 19th century novel would very often begin by addressing the reader. Think of Laclos' *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*:

> We feel in duty bound to warn our readers that, despite the title and the editor's comments in his preface, we cannot guarantee the authenticity of these letters.
>
> Choderlos de Laclos: *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* (1782)

Yet, there is an important difference. The opening of *Moby-Dick* is exceptional for its time because it is not a faux-author who appeals to the reader in a preface, but rather a narrator who appeals to the reader from "inside" the story, as it were, in order to establish the terms of the fictional world that the reader is to enter. This is what is so "modern" about Melville.

THE LITERARY ACT AND THE CONTRACT OF FICTION

As I shall endeavor to show, it is a historic phenomenon that 20th century novels tend to refer more frequently to the performative aspect of its opening. However, I claim that this is not because modern openings are *more* performative, but rather because that they tend to exploit or expose its performativity more self-consciously. In fact, it is my general contention that all openings possess equal performative force; performativity is simply a defining feature of literature. When the reader is directly addressed, as in the above 20th century examples, what takes place is simply that the "implicit" reader is addressed: the actual reader will always have to enter into a pragmatic situation when beginning a fictional work. As Gérard Genette has shown, even the primordial opening "once upon a time" can analytically be reduced to two pragmatic functions[118]. The first function is in fact a request: "try to imagine that there was a time", and the second is performative: "now I intend to cause you to imagine that there was a time"[119]. I shall elaborate on these considerations of the formula "once upon a time…" in my subsection dealing with the existential opening (below from p. 88). This performative function is precisely what allows the reader to pass the threshold of the book and enter into the fiction.

[118] Gérard Genette, *Fiction et diction*, Poétique (Paris: Seuil, 1991). 49-50.

[119] In Algerian Arabic, the standard opening phrase literally goes "I've told you what's coming", thereby acknowledging directly a narrator and a listener.

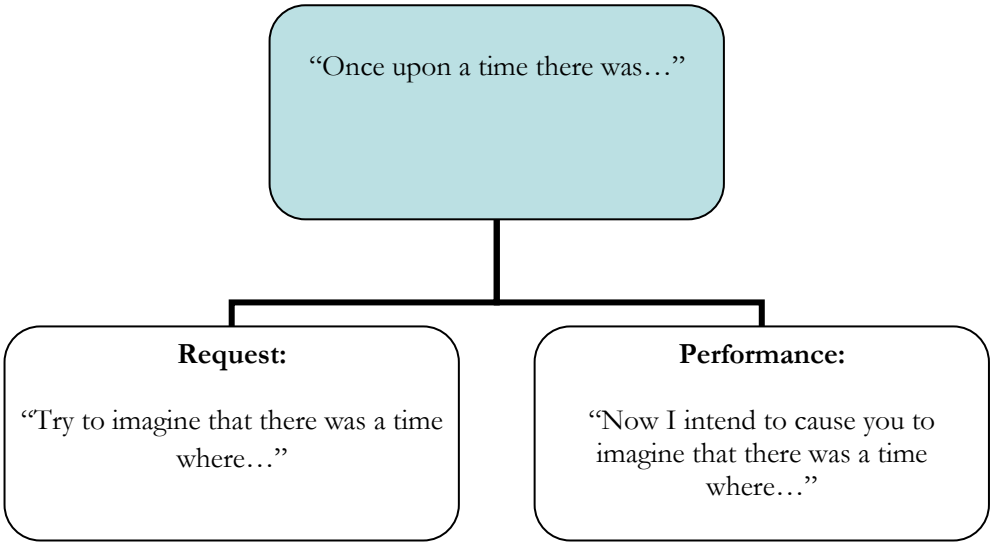

Figure 2: The performativity of the beginning

This performativity of the opening could be expressed more generally – and more dramatically – by saying that to tell a story is to exercise a certain power. The opening is an impingement, and this is a situation, which both parts – the author and the reader – will have to acknowledge. As Ross Chambers expresses it in his work on narrative "seduction": "The situation produced in the text proves subordinate to the situation produced by the text"[120]. In other words, the narrative is always subordinate to the narration itself. This is simply a consequence of the way that language generally works, for as Paul Valéry concludes: "tout langage dit 'je suis acte de quelqu'un' avant de signaler autre chose"[121]. Language is *someone's act* before it is anything else. Therefore, even in a heterodiegetic narrative – and even if it be

[120] Ross Chambers, *Story and Situation: Narrative Seduction and the Power of Fiction* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984). 45.

[121] Valéry: *Cahiers*, Cited by ibid.

covert – there is an underlying pragmatic contact between an "I" and a "you", which renders the opening performative. As Ford Madox Ford says: "Life [does] not narrate"[122]; *someone* does.

Valéry's idea that language is to be seen first and foremost as an act, has since become an widely accepted view in the philosophy of language, where the so-called speech act theory developed in the 1960's and 1970's under the influence of notably J. L. Austin and John Searle[123]. It has now become almost commonplace in the humanities to talk of "speech acts", but in the literary field a speech act has often had an almost revelatory or mystical attraction, perhaps because of the way that Derrida used it[124]. Instead I wish undramatically to use some of the pragmaticians' distinctions in order to use speech acts to shed light upon my idea of the "contract", which the literary opening installs. In particular, I wish to draw attention to some of the elements of H. P. Grice's theory of language, in particular his notion of the "cooperative principle", which has only very rarely been related to literary theory[125]. Of course, I thereby implicitly postulate that we must treat literature as a language and, hence, as subject to the rules of language[126]. Yet, I also claim that literature differentiates itself from other communication precisely because of its particular pragmatic position.

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[122] Ford Madox Ford, *Critical writings*, Regents critics series (Lincoln,: University of Nebraska Press, 1964). 73.

[123] John Langshaw Austin, *How to do things with words*, The William James lectures 1955 (Cambridge,: Harvard University Press, 1962); John R. Searle, *Speech acts: an essay in the philosophy of language* (London,: Cambridge U.P., 1969).

[124] Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc*, Collection La Philosophie en effet (Paris: Galilée, 1990); John Searle, "Reiterating the Differences: A Reply to Derrida," *Glyph* I(1977).

[125]Herbert Paul Grice, "Logic and conversation," in *Studies in the way of words*, ed. Herbert Paul Grice (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989). One theorist who has worked with Grice in a literary setting is Teun Adrianus van Dijk, "Pragmatics and Poetics," in *Pragmatics of language and literature*, ed. Teun Adrianus van Dijk, *North-Holland studies in theoretical poetics 2* (Amsterdam/New York: North-Holland Pub. Co./American Elsevier Pub. Co., 1976).

[126] In this respect I cannot deny being influenced by structuralism, so I may as well admit it openly.

The central element in Grice's theory is that for any successful communication to take place there must exist an unspoken *agreement* between the speakers. In essence, the speakers must both agree to *cooperate*: their communication must be relevant, with neither too much nor too little information, and it must be true. This is what Grice calls the "cooperative principle" of language. Even if we cannot always live up to every maxim of this principle, we can communicate successfully by indicating that we still pay respect to the principle, for instance by adding the hedge "I guess…" to a statement that we are not absolutely sure about. "I guess Peter is coming" is not false if Peter is not coming because the speaker has cooperatively indicated that the information is not certain. The question is, however, what happens if the cooperative principle is not respected at all? Grice himself points out that a speaker can either *flout* or *violate* the principle. A violation is a rather simple disrespect of the principle, whereas a flouting in certain contexts can render the communication more *creative*. Grice's theory could be summed up as a theory of relevance, but as he himself was aware, it is not all contexts that call for relevance. In fact, it is precisely when things are not "relevant" in the strict communicative sense, that they may become creative or even artistic.

These Gricean considerations are highly useful in our literary context. The flouting of the cooperative principle is in fact a common phenomenon in fiction. For instance, when literature begins *in medias res* it openly flouts Grice's "maxim of manner", a part of the cooperative principle which dictates an orderly presentation. My suggestion is that literature, like other language, is based on an unspoken agreement, but that some of the terms of this agreement work differently in the case of literature. For instance, it seems not just totally acceptable to flout the cooperative principle from time to time; we as readers actually *expect* a book to flout the cooperative principle. The author is not just supposed to "inform" us through a narrative, but also

supposed to surprise us, to challenge us, fascinate us. We therefore begin to understand why "information" and "seduction" at the opening of a narrative almost work against each other: A literary text builds on an implicit, communicative agreement, which it is supposed both to *endorse* and to *challenge*.

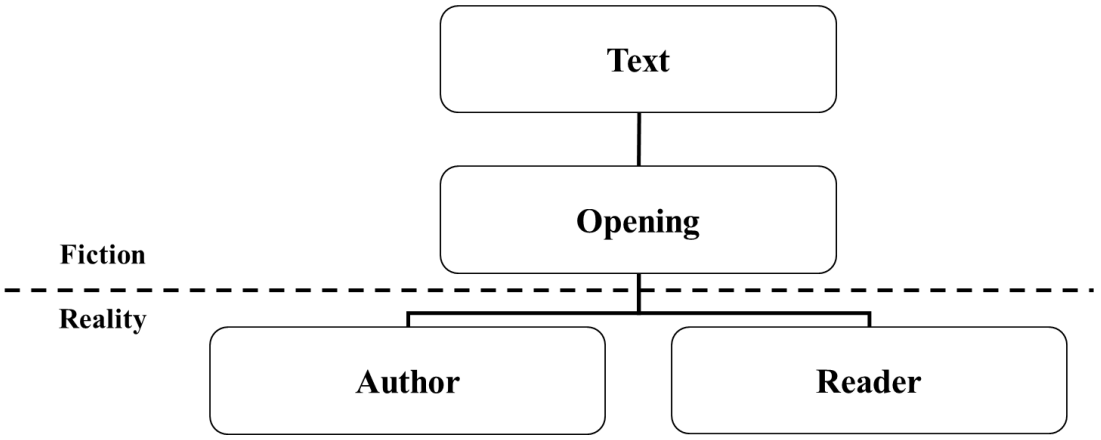

Figure 3: The opening as mediator between fiction and reality

Acknowledging that literature, like other language, works through an agreement amounts to acknowledging that it is performative. I mentioned, however, that 20th century novels more frequently point to this performative quality. I argued that this does not make them more performative; like all openings, they are performative by nature. We may, however, use Austin's later distinction between the implicit and the explicit performative to say that although all literary openings are performative, some are *explicitly* performative, whereas most are merely implicitly performative ("implicit" because based on an implicit agreement).

That all openings are performative is of course a rather majestic contention. After all, novelistic openings are structurally very different, and one could object, for instance, that some begin with discourse, which gives no immediate point of contact between the narrator and the

reader. I maintain, however, that, despite some qualifications, openings are *necessarily* performative, but in order to illustrate this contention further, I find it indispensable to identify the different forms of openings. In the following sections, I therefore establish a taxonomy of openings. On the basis of such a directory, I argue that a novel's performative nature mainly evolves around its *explicit or implicit indications of its own fictionality*. I therefore focus on what I, inspired by Brombert, call "narrative signals". On the basis of this observation I shall also maintain somewhat paradoxically that the *sooner* a narrative indicates its fictional status, the more likely it is to gain the trust and credibility of the reader. That is a consequence of the contractual nature of literature: it is also cooperative to signal a narrative's fictionality.

THE TAXONOMY OF OPENINGS:

The implicit "Incipit" and the explicit "Explicit"

Before establishing a taxonomy of openings, I must explain in more detail how we are to *locate* the opening, a challenge I touched upon in my prologue. Typically there is no *explicit* indication of where a book begins. It is no coincidence that in Latin "incipit" is in fact the antonym of "explicit". The ending, or the "explicit", may be *explicitly* indicated by "The End", "La Fin" or the Latin "explicit est liber". By contrast, the beginning is never indicated by "The Beginning", unless for some exceptions where the author intends an ironic play on beginnings as such[127]. Beginnings may be difficult to understand, yet typically when we open a book, we as readers locate the beginning quite easily. The indication of a literary beginning therefore works at a different level, as an implicit transition into fiction. Yet, since a beginning is a radical

[127] This is the case in Julio Cortázar's novels, for instance, "This is the way it begins", see Julio Cortázar, *La vuelta al día en ochenta mundos*, La Creación literaria (México: Siglo Veintiuno Editores, 1967).

phenomenon, our ability to comprehend a beginning must depend on much more than explicit markers: it must depend very strongly on an "agreement", which again depends strongly on a number of cultural codes, such as a conventionality with regard to the structure of books, in the first place, and a conventionality with regard to the structure of texts, in the second place. The structure of books, or what is typically referred to as "the paratext", may of course explicitly point to the book's fictional status, for instance by having "A Novel" printed on its front cover. Important as these paratextual markers are for a number of texts, paratext however falls outside the scope of my present study, which is interested in how the text itself orchestrates its own beginning. Furthermore, only some texts rely fundamentally on paratextual markers, whereas all texts will have to rely on a textual indication of beginning (or what Genette would call "architext"). I therefore wish to put paratextual signals aside and instead locate the purely textual means of indicating the beginning of a fictional text, in order to pinpoint the performative nature of all literary openings.

Considering the variety and sheer quantity of novelistic openings – we are talking about no less than all books of fiction ever written – I hope for my reader's clemency with regard to the comprehensiveness of my ambition of setting up a taxonomy of openings. Since I obviously have not read all books ever written, my scheme cannot claim to have taken all books into consideration! My method therefore cannot be deductive, but will have to be inductive. On the basis of all the openings I have worked with, however, I first located about 15 ways of beginning a text of fiction, which I then further reduced to the following five ways, which I shall discuss in the remainder of this chapter:

1. The insistence on an **individual story** rather than a general one.

2. The use of the **trope of beginning**, the opening uses a natural beginning, say, birth.
3. The use of an indirect signal of **irony**, especially with reference to truthfulness
4. The use of a familiar **introductory formula**, typically a variation of "once upon a time".
5. The use of **abruptness,** not so much by *in medias res*, but more importantly through subjective, "perspectival" abruptness, realized for instance by the use of demonstratives and "unexplained" pronouns (this point will be explained in much more detail in the second half of the chapter).

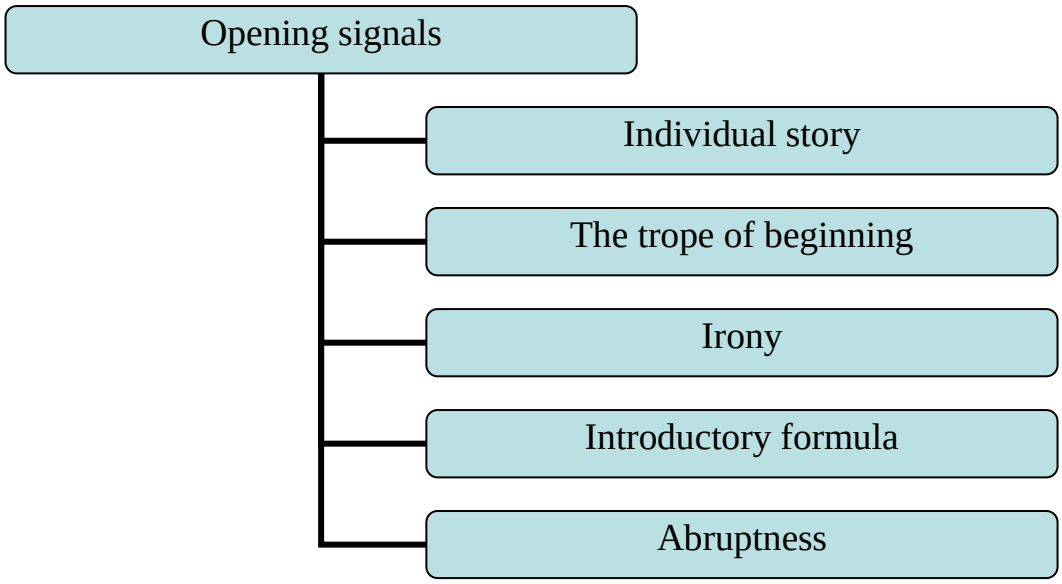

Figure 4: Taxonomy of openings

Some texts employ two or more of these five techniques; but all fictional texts, I claim, use *at least one* of them.

EXCEPTIONS TO THE FIVE SIGNALS

When making such a general claim, I do however need to account first for a number of evident exceptions to these five techniques. Most notably, some openings do not commence with an

immediately recognizable narrative component, which could establish the performative parameters of the "contract" of fiction. Some openings, for instance, begin with discourse, with a maxim, with an epistle, with a quotation or even with a preface, which technically may lie in between paratext and text, for instance the preface to *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* (mentioned above on p. 65) or Fielding's preface to *Tom Jones* (mentioned above on p. 58). Some examples are:

Discourse:

> "Ah, don't begin to fuss"
>
> Rebecca West: *The Return of the Soldier* (1918)

Idiom:

> Ships at a distance have every man's wish on board.
>
> Zora Neale Hurston: *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937)

Axiom:

> It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife.
>
> Jane Austen: *Pride and Prejudice* (1813)

Aphorism:

> Happy families are all alike;
> every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.
>
> Leo Tolstoy: *Anna Karenina* (1873-77)

Quotation, in this case (an erroneous) quotation of another beginning:

> "All happy families are more or less dissimilar; all unhappy ones are more or less alike", says a great Russian writer in the beginning of a famous novel.
>
> Vladimir Nabokov: *Ada, or Ardor: A Family Chronicle* (1969)

Some openings even combine discourse and axiom:

> "The act of love is of no importance, since it can be performed indefinitely". All eyes were turned upon the perpetrator of this absurdity.
>
> Alfred Jarry: *The Supermale* (1902)

Although it is important to emphasize that these exceptions may serve to expose how the narrator adopts phrases from other contexts and may be instrumental in preparing the reader for the remainder of the novel, these examples share the characteristic that the reader appears to be temporarily cut off from interacting directly with a narrator. Nabokov's opening of *Ada, or Ardor* could for instance be the opening of a scholarly book on literary history – that is, of course, if we did not at first notice that Nabokov in fact turns Tolstoy's opening on its head. Austen's opening could perhaps be the opening of a (now obsolete!) book of sociology, although in the literary context the axiom is important in showing how the narrator adopts an axiom and brings this forth to the reader. I claim, however, that the examples are not really exceptions, but simply employ an initial confusion, which rarely lasts longer than a line or – at most – a paragraph. In these openings, the pragmatic interaction with the opening is in order words simply postponed a line or two. This postponement is of course not "cooperative" in the Gricean sense, but it is done to create a certain effect. As Jarry's novel cited above goes on to say about its initial utterance: "The surprising sentence had the same effect as a stone dropped in a pond: after

a short initial confusion a general interest is created"[128]. This is also the effect that such non-narrative opening lines most often help to establish: a short initial confusion, which then generates interest. The maxim, quotation or dialogue is not irrelevant to the work – it can be very central indeed, but it is "irrelevant" in the sense that it does not determine its narrative structure; only the direct interaction between narrator and reader does. In the above examples, the pragmatic aspect of the opening is therefore simply postponed[129]. This literary "feint" means also that the establishment of the narrative "contract" is slightly postponed.

DEMARCATION OF THE OPENING

As a consequence, I must also quickly address the question of demarcation of the opening, which I first posed in my prologue. Where does the opening *end*? Since I argue that an opening may employ various techniques of postponing the narrative situation, I cannot otherwise dogmatically claim that the literary opening consists of the first line or the first three lines or some other rigid rule. Instead I must say more loosely that the opening is whatever suffices to establish the narrative situation. The opening is whatever sets the reader in a position to grasp the contract of fiction. This demarcation could of course be said to be rather vague, but I claim that any attempt to set up a rigid rule will simply fail because the variety of books of fiction will in itself break down any such attempt. If, for instance, we tried to claim that the opening consists of the first line of a novel, we would be at a total loss with experimental books, which contain no

[128] Alfred Jarry, *Le surmâle* (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1902).

[129] I here also argue against Helmut Bonheim's way of classifying openings. Helmut Bonheim, "How Stories Begin: Devices of Exposition in 600 English, American, and Canadian Stories," *The Yearbook of R.E.A.L.* 1(1982). He claims that there are generally four types of openings: 1. with comment, 2. with description, 3. with report, 4. with speech. The problem is, however, that speech does not determine the narrative situation and therefore will have to seen in the narrative context. I therefore do not see speech as an independent category in itself.

punctuation, or with Marie Ndiaye's *Comédie classique* (1987), where the whole novel provocatively is written in one line. A rigid demarcation of the opening simply will not do in any case. I therefore find that the most useful is to locate the opening where the reader is able to establish the narrative situation by accepting the pragmatic contract of fiction.

My demarcation of the opening is, however, open to other difficulties. First of all, I will have to admit that in a sense the contract of fiction is negotiated throughout the novel. My contention is, however, that the further negotiation of the contract is typically still based on the initial contract. As the German novelist Martin Walser claims, the opening adamantly determines how the "game" is played[130]. Rendering the narrative situation more complex does not undermine the initial situation, but is a natural extension of it.

In some rare situations, my demarcation may, however, run into a more serious problem if the initial narrative setting is radically transformed later in the novel. This certainly occurs in modern, experimental novels, but it also occurs in a famous and classic example like Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1856). Flaubert's novel begins with Charles Bovary as the focalizer of the story, but after he has met Emma, the story completely abandons its initial focalizer and instead exclusively adopts the focus of Emma. My own interpretation of this peculiar, narrative abandonment is that it serves to forebode how Charles is later rather randomly discarded by Emma. Not even the narrator is faithful to Charles… In this case, the narrative situation at the beginning does not represent the novel as a whole, and from a narratological point of view we need to treat the story as two overlapping stories with two different pragmatic contracts with the reader (who may or may not be entirely conscious about the shift in focalization).

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[130] "Der Roman ist zwar immer ein Spiel, aber der erste Satz entscheidet unerbittlich, wie diesmal gespielt werden soll". Walser, "Erfahrungen mit ersten Sätzen oder Aller Anfang ist schwer," 162.

However, the dramatic effect of such narrative shifts also clearly shows that my demarcation is a sensible one. Flaubert's shift of narrative focalizer is a bewildering one, but our bewilderment also shows that the shift is exceptional. By contrast, one is not surprised or puzzled when a few lines of speech stop, and a narrator and a narrative situation is introduced. This is because speech does not *shift* the narrative situation, but as already argued merely *postpones* the establishment of the narrative situation. I therefore feel justified in maintaining that novels that open with speech, axioms or other citations must be treated in a broader context in which the narrative situation can be established. Of course, I do not in any way rule out that fruitful observations can be made on the basis of, for instance, the historical variations in the frequency with which novels begin with speech. I am merely saying that speech cannot be analyzed as an opening signal in itself: the study of speech depends on the narrative situation.

Having explained why I do not treat speech and other utterances as independent classes in my taxonomy, I wish in the following to explain each of the central five signals or techniques that I have instead located, and show how each of them highlights the pragmatic aspect of all openings.

1ST SIGNAL: INSISTENCE ON AN INDIVIDUAL STORY RATHER THAN A GENERAL ONE

It lies embedded in the concept of literature that the story to be told is an individual one. For instance when Le Clézio begins his novel *Le Procès verbal* by "Il y avait une toute petite fois, pendant le canicule, un type qui était assis devant une fenêtre ouverte…"[131]. There we plunge into a specific setting, at a specific time, and meet a specific individual. Although, in this case, this individual is not specified by name, but simply by an indefinite article, we expect that this

[131] I analyzed this opening in more detail on page 26.

introduction is merely suspended a bit. A general story belongs for instance to science, which is supposed to generalize in order to obtain working hypotheses. A scientific work could of course begin by "a guy sitting in front of a window tends to catch a cold". But here the tense helps to mark the difference. It is simply part of the contract of fiction that the story must have happened already when we hear it or read it[132]. Of course, not all literary works will begin by insisting that it is an individual story and not a general one. A literary work may in fact attempt to cause an initial confusion in the way, for instance, that the first two lines of Nabokov's *Ada, or Ardor* (cited above on p. 75) are confusing because a book on literary history *could* have started in the same fashion – and also in the past tense. But that is Nabokov's purpose – the book is also a parody of literary history – and only the third line of the novel establishes the individuality of the story: "That pronouncement has little if any relation to the story to be unfolded now…". Then, the indication that the story is an individual one signals that it is a piece of fiction.

It is important to note also that the standard opening "once upon a time there was…" also indicates a story's individuality through the use of the existential component "there was". We therefore have reason to believe that the insistence on an individual story is related to the use of the standard opening and vice versa. I shall therefore take up this point again in my discussion of "once upon a time" and the indefinite, existential component "there was" (see from p. 88 below).

2ND SIGNAL: THE TROPE OF BEGINNING: THE APPEAL THAT TURNS IRONIC

Instead of using a signal of individuality, for instance through an existential component, the work may introduce the reader to the work by explicitly drawing attention to the phenomenon of

[132] I shall conclude on this important presupposition of fiction in my section "Conclusion: Is Literature "cooperative?" on p. 120.

beginning. This technique was the one that I discussed in my first chapter "A Cosmology of Openings". The difficulty of beginning can in this way be alleviated by using the trope of beginning. We remember, for instance, that the word "first" or "primus" is used throughout our literary history to signal primary events in the narration: we saw it in the case of Homer and Hesiod, but it is also the case with Herodotos, Virgil, Propertius, and all the way up to Milton's opening: "Of Man's first disobedience" (*Paradise Lost*, 1667). Here the work begins with a beginning so as to justify its own beginning.

In Chapter 1, I looked at the ways in which the beginning of a literary work tried to justify its authority and authenticity through a search for natural beginnings. In particular I looked at the ways that literature used cosmological beginnings and natural events like births to set itself in motion. I argued that the simultaneity between a specific literary opening and an external natural beginning tended not to create the necessity that one would expect, but rather insinuated that any beginning is contingent. In fact, such beginnings often turn ironic, as we saw in the case of several of Dickens' novels and in the case of Tristram Shandy[133]. As I now go on to illustrate further, through a number of literary examples, the use of the trope of beginning rather accentuates that a particular beginning is randomly chosen and could be replaced by a number of possible beginnings. To draw attention to the beginning tends to point out that the beginning is contingent and dependent upon the will of the narrator. The trope of beginning therefore easily introduces another ironic layer to the opening, a layer which, I claim, is at the very core of the work's claim to fictional credulity. When, for instance, a narrator draws

[133] The trope of travel is a way of using a natural beginning, which is not quite as dramatic: "The schoolmaster was leaving the village, and everybody seemed sorry." Thomas Hardy and Norman Page, *Jude the obscure : an authoritative text, backgrounds and contexts, criticism*, 2nd ed., A Norton critical edition (New York: W.W. Norton, 1999); Thomas Mann, *Der Zauberberg* (Berlin: S. Fischer, 1924).

attention to the beginning of the tale, it very often becomes a relativization of the narrative perspective: the tale could have begun in several ways, as we see in the following examples:

> It might be most dramatically effective to begin the tale at the moment when Arnold Baffin rang me up and said, "Bradley, could you come round here, please, I think that I have just killed my wife". A deeper pattern however suggests Francis Marloe as the first speaker, the page or housemaid (these images would appeal to him) who, some half an hour before Arnold's momentous telephone call, initiates the action ... There are indeed many places where I could start.
>
> Iris Murdoch: *The Black Prince* (1973)

> In the middle of last summer a small Norwegian coastal town was the scene of some highly unusual events. A stranger appeared in town, a certain Nagel, a remarkable, eccentric charlatan who did a lot of curious things and then disappeared as suddenly as he had come. What's more, the man was visited by a mysterious young lady, who came on heaven knows what business and left after only a few hours, afraid to stay any longer. But this is not the beginning…
>
> The beginning is as follows: When the steamer docked around six o'clock in the evening, there appeared on deck two or three passengers, including a man wearing a lid yellow suit and a wide velvet cap.
>
> Knut Hamsun: *Mysteries* (1892)

> Where to begin? A week has passed since I wrote that sentence. (…) There! I've done it! I've found a place to begin.
>
> Gore Vidal: *Kalki* (1978)

In the three openings, attention is drawn to the difficulty of describing the story correctly from the beginning – and this difficulty becomes a theme in itself. It highlights the fragile position of

the narrator, whose doubt and insecurity become a circuitous way of augmenting the narration's trustworthiness. The ready acceptance of the narrator's fallibility in fact supports the importance of the tale itself: it is precisely because of its importance that the narrator hesitates[134]. In 20th century novels, this hesitation very easily becomes a kind of "refusal" to begin; the beginning often becomes a groping with the question of the tale's authority and the role of the narrator in its presentation. It seems to be the case, in fact, that the *more* a novel draws attention to its own mode of beginning, the more it reflects and comments on prior conventions for beginning, as we see in the following examples:

> There was a depression over the Atlantic. It was traveling eastward, toward an area of high pressure over Russia, and still showed no tendency to move northward around it. (...) In short, to use an expression that describes the facts pretty satisfactorily, even though it is somewhat old-fashioned: it was a fine August day in the year 1913.
>
> Robert Musil: *The Man without Qualities* (1930-43)

> Ami lecteur, t'attendrais-tu par hasard à me voir commencer cette historiette par: 'La lune pâle se levait sur un ténébreux horizon...' ou par: 'Trois jeunes hommes, l'un blond, l'autre brun et le troisième rouge, gravissaient péniblement...' ou par... Ma foi, non ! tous ces débuts, étant vulgaires, sont ennuyeux et, puisque je n'ai pas assez d'imagination pour te jeter sur la scène de mon récit d'une manière un peu neuve, j'aime mieux ne pas commencer du tout et t'avertir tout bonnement que Matteo Cigoli était, de l'aveu général, le meilleur

[134] An example is also Ford Madox Ford, *The good soldier*; a tale of passion (New York,: J. Lane, 1915). One could define this as a narratological *effet réel*. This is also the reason why the muse has been important historically. If the opening must begin somewhere into the story (cf. the fabula/sjuzhet-distinction on p. 97) this threatens to be an anywhere. Only through the guidance of a divine power could the "anywhere" be eliminated and the "somewhere" justified. I do therefore not see the traditional Muse as a power of unmediated inspiration, but rather as a narrative determinant in the dodging of the ex nihilo.

> garçon, le plus gai, le plus actif et plus spirituel qu'eût produit son village, situé à quelques lieues de Bologne.
>
> Gobineau: *Scaramouche* (1843)

The attention on the beginning often brings with it a certain ironic distance to its own mode of beginning. In Musil's novel, the mode of beginning is shown to depend entirely on the mode of description. The same situation under a different description, in this case a meteorological one, seems almost alienating to the reader, whereas the "old-fashioned" one sounds cliché-ridden. A text's attention on its own beginning *as a way of beginning* is in other words closely related to the third of my five classifications of beginnings, namely the presence of an immediate signal of irony. The attention on the mode of beginning often serves to relativize the authority of the speaking subject, which in fact only underlines the text's status as fiction. The intensity of the beginning's irony and self-consciousness is of course subject to historical variation – "modern" or "postmodern" novels may seem more readily to exude self-conscious irony. However, I wish to qualify this claim by saying rather that the irony of the beginning simply takes different forms in different historical periods. In the modern novel, the irony takes a primarily self-conscious form, but due to its performative nature, all narratives could be said to involve one or another form of irony in its opening, as I shall continue to show in the next section. This opening irony is in fact likely to be a defining characteristic of novelistic narratives and one of the central reasons why the opening is the "lieu littéraire par excellence".

3RD SIGNAL: INDIRECT IRONY (AND THE KERNEL OF REALISM)

In chapter 1 as well as in the previous section of this chapter, I have shown that an opening that explicitly uses the trope of beginning easily gives way to a certain irony. In fact, this irony is in

itself an important means of opening a narrative effectively. I shall now try to determine more precisely the nature of this irony and its role. Since we may not be surprised to find a certain irony in, say, Julio Cortázar's experimental openings, or even in Musil's calculated openings, I shall instead locate ironic components in the genre where one would perhaps least expect it: realist and naturalistic novels of the 19th Century. In fact, these ironic components in the openings of realist and naturalistic novels will also tell us a great deal about the limits of the realist project in literature.

The realist opening characteristically gives a thorough introduction to the setting of the novel. It is quite common to begin by precise temporal and spatial indications and with a detailed description of the physical surroundings; the weather, the landscape, the house etc.

> Vers la fin de l'année 1612, par une froide matinée de décembre, un jeune homme dont le vêtement était de très mince apparence, se promenait devant la porte d'une maison située rue des Grands- Augustins, à Paris.
>
> Honoré de Balzac: *Le Chef-d'œuvre inconnu* (1831)

> Madame Vauquer, née de Conflans, est une vieille femme qui, depuis quarante ans, tient à Paris une pension bourgeoise établie rue Neuve-Sainte-Geneviève, entre le quartier latin et le faubourg Saint-Marceau.
>
> Honoré de Balzac: *Le Père Goriot* (1835)

> Onze heures venaient de sonner à la Bourse, lorsque Saccard entra chez Champeaux, dans la salle blanc et or, dont les deux hautes fenêtres donnent sur la place.
>
> Émile Zola: *L'Argent* (1891)

The richness in details is even more concrete in the case of Zola's openings, where the temporal indication becomes a specific time of the day and the spatial frame is described even at the level of the number of windows in the room. We furthermore notice that both in *Le Père Goriot* and in *L'Argent*, the characters are introduced directly with their proper name: Madame Vauquer and Saccard. By contrast, in *Le Chef-d'œuvre inconnu* the protagonist is introduced as "un jeune homme", but the short story makes a point of later disclosing that this young man in fact is the great Nicolas Poussin, a point that could not have been made if the name had been mentioned right away. Although Balzac also opens *Le Père Goriot* by introducing characters directly by a proper name, Zola is far more radical in his opening. There is no explanation at this point of who Saccard is, and who the Champeaux are, and we see a heavy predominance of definite articles ("la salle", "les fenêtres", "la place") whereas Balzac's openings are full of indefinite articles ("une femme, "une pension", "une matinée", "un jeune homme", "une maison"). This difference between Balzac and Zola is extremely significant to the narrative situation, and I shall return to this discussion of proper names and indefinite articles in the next section. Zola's opening gives us a sense of an *in medias res* opening, but I shall show that Zola rarely uses *in medias res*, which I consider to be a *temporal* device, but the sense of *abruptness* is due precisely to the definitive articles and the unintroduced proper names, which challenges our idea of subjective *perspective*.

The richness of information at the beginning of the novel is precisely what has become the trademark of the realist tradition. The paradox is, however, that these realist details in fact work against the realist principle itself. First of all, too much information flouts Grice's cooperative principle because it becomes difficult to locate the kernel of the communication. This observation lies close to Claude Simon's critique of the 19th century novel when, in his

Nobel speech, he deplores that "the descriptions [took] over the novel, completely forgetting the fable that it was meant for"[135]. Second, the insistence on such details is rather ironically an indication of fictionality because this richness in no way is verifiable by history and other documentary narratives. This second observation lies close to Roland Barthes' critique of the naturalists' use of "reality effects", whose only use is to render the narrative more "real", but in fact end up as an implausible technique[136].

It is therefore no wonder that verisimilitude is hard to obtain in literary texts. In the name of verisimilitude, naturalists end up packing the novel with information in such a degree that it flouts not just the Gricean contract of *relevance*, but also all standards of *verifiability*. Other narratives with a realist impetus have tried to circumvent these difficulties by explicitly asserting the story's truthfulness. It is remarkable, however, that even in such assertions lies a great deal of irony. Think, for instance, of Kurt Vonnegut's anti-war book *Slaughterhouse-Five*:

> All this happened, more or less. The war parts, anyway, are pretty much true.
> One guy I knew really was shot in Dresden for taking a teapot that wasn't his.
>
> Kurt Vonnegut: *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969)

The peculiar thing about Vonnegut's opening is that by admitting that all parts of the narrative may not be entirely true, the narrator himself appears more real. Trustworthiness is also a feint, and the literary opening is the place where the text asserts its authority and its truth conditions. The opening is the place where we sense most dramatically the tension between the illusion of

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[135] Claude Simon, "Discours à Stockholm," Nobel Media AB, www.nobel.se. Also refer to Valéry's: "toutes les histoires approfondissent en fables" from the aphorism "Au commencement était la fable", see my chapter 4 on Valéry and the French hesitation towards the novel.

[136] "Le Bruissement de la langue" in Roland Barthes, *Œuvres complètes*, 5 vols. (Paris: Seuil, 2002).

reality and the acceptance of that illusion[137]. Generally we can say that narratives cannot get everything right: they will either have to *pretend* to tell the truth about the actual world or *claim* to tell the truth about a fictional universe[138]. Therefore, rather ironically, the assertion of truthfulness at the outset of the story is typically an indication of fictionality.

We remember for instance the opening chapter of *Huckleberry Finn* (1884) where Huck describes *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and says "that book was made by Mr. Mark Twain and he told the truth, mainly"[139]. Fiction in the realist tradition will attempt to downplay the acceptance of the illusion – certainly Zola with his typically covert heterodiegetic narrator would never point directly to issues of the narrator's trustworthiness, but precisely herein lies also the frailty of the naturalist fiction. However, Balzac's heterodiegetic, but more overt narrator does in fact address this question in *Le Père Goriot*. A few lines into the novel the narrator exclaims: "Ah! sachez-le: ce drame n'est ni une fiction, ni un roman. *All is true*, il est si véritable, que chacun peut en reconnaître les éléments chez soi, dans son cœur peut-être". Here the narrator in fact tries to undo the novelistic contract, which has already begun, and for instance denies some of the story's individuality. The story is supposedly so true that its elements can be recognized by everyone. Yet, the narrator's exclamation appears so radical that we cannot help thinking that it must be hyperbolic. The sudden reference in English "All is true" furthermore adds an ironic touch. When we then realize that it is a reference to Shakespeare's *Henry VIII*, whose original subtitle was "All is true", we sense that the exclamation should perhaps not been taken literally. That is, *Le Père Goriot* is as "true" as a literary work can be.

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[137] Cf. Victor Brombert's important suggestion in his important article on the opening signals in fiction. Brombert, "Opening Signals in Narrative," 501.

[138] Cf. Eco, "Fictional Protocols," 120.

[139] Mark Twain, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn (Tom Sawyer's comrade)* (New York: C. L. Webster and Company, 1885).

In my section on the trope of beginning, I showed that a narrator who successfully hesitates between different ways of beginning tends to appear more trustworthy and his/her narrative appears more important. This technique, however, requires the narrator to be overt, and this is precisely what the realist instinct forbids. We could in fact, rather provocatively, say that the narrator's hesitation is a rather successful "reality effect". The problem is that the situations which a narrative describes are infinitely rich – a description would in principle have to be never-ending. Therefore, there is much insight in Joseph Conrad's summary of the author's role: "all the author appeals to is our credulity, the logic of the situations and the characters can be discussed *ad infinitum*"[140]. Conrad reminds us of what his friend and co-writer Ford Madox Ford has already told us: "Life [does] not narrate"[141]. Realism is naïve if it pretends that life does narrate, and it is hence placed in a dilemma.

4TH SIGNAL: THE INTRODUCTORY FORMULA: "ONCE UPON A TIME"

What I call an "introductory formula" is an opening line that sounds familiar to the reader and creates certain associations and expectations already from the outset. "It was a dark and stormy night" in English literature is one, and "La marquise sortit à cinq heures" in French literature is another. Despite often being subjected to ridicule and satirical pastiche, the impact of such sentences is remarkably long-lasting; introductory formulae establish a paradigm which goes far beyond the sentence itself.

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[140] Preface to Joseph Conrad, *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* (London: The New Review, 1897).

[141] Ford, *Critical writings*: 73.

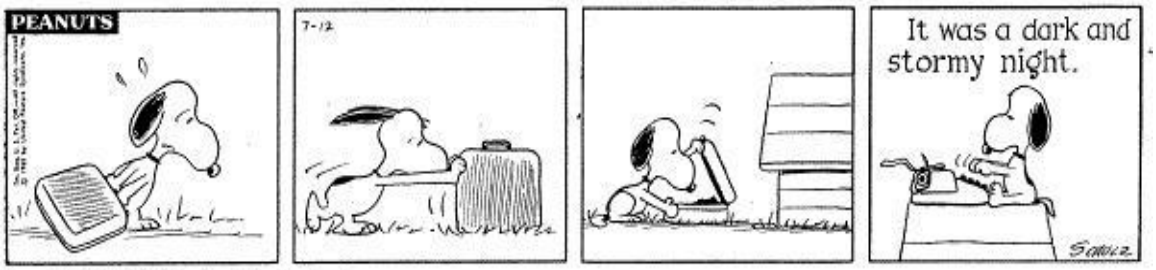

Illustration 3: Charles Schultz' Peanuts: "It was a dark and stormy night"

(reprinted with permission from the United Press Syndicate)

"It was a dark and stormy night", which most people now know from Charles Schulz' cartoon, was of course not originally penned by Snoopy. It stems from Edward Bulwer-Lytton – who has sometimes been called one of the 19th Century's "greatest" bad writers[142]. Bulwer-Lytton's opening of *Paul Clifford* (1830) has been so parodied that San Jose State University now even holds an annual contest that challenges entrants to "compose the opening sentence to the worst of all possible novels"[143]. The competition has received such intense attention that it has been covered by international media, and the winning entries have been published by Penguin in several volumes. This interest only proves that the opening sentence certainly holds a sway on authors and readers alike and establishes clear parameters of expectation. In chapter 4 I shall expound on the nature of such a paradigm of an opening line, by looking in close detail on the French variant "La marquise sortit à cinq heures", originally proposed in scoff by Paul Valéry.

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[142] Bulwer-Lytton is commonly described so in the The Bulwer-Lytton Fiction Contest, see the next footnote.

[143] The Bulwer-Lytton Fiction Contest, see www.bulwer-lytton.com. Edward George Bulwer-Lytton, *Paul Clifford* (New York,: Printed by J. & J. Harper, 1830).

If every country has its own opening to scorn, the archetypal opening formula is of course "once upon a time there was…". One may associate this opening with the Brothers Grimm or with Hans Christian Andersen, where the familiar opening assists the child easily to tune into the story and the storytelling itself. It is therefore widely believed that to begin by "once upon a time" is a *convention*. In the following, however, I wish to argue that this opening is far more than a convention: it is a universal, cognitive structure.

In English the formula can be detected in writing back to at least 1380 (according to the OED), that is, back to very dawn of the English language. What is more striking is that it exists in all natural languages: "Había una vez", "Il était une fois" , "Hajitek ma jitek" (Algerian Arabic), "Mukashi mukashi" (Japanese), "Der var engang" (Danish). There are of course variations between the precise wording in the different languages, but the structure remains essentially the same. English requires temporal phrases to stand first in a sentence, so the formula begins "once upon a time", but in almost all other Indo-European languages, for instance, Romance and Germanic languages, the first two words make up an *existential* structure through a personal pronoun and "to be" in past tense: "Il était une fois", "Había una vez", "Es war einmal", "Der var engang". In several Slavic languages the universal formula begins by an existential phrase, only to negate it immediately afterwards: "there was, there was not", which helps underscore the fictional status. In any case, the formula is omnipresent, both temporally and geographically: it is part of all languages and always has been.

Moreover, it is a historical fact that not only children's stories use this opening formula: nearly all oral narratives use it, across cultures and languages. It may therefore be most correct to argue that the formula is *universal*, perhaps even a complex extension of our "universal grammar" in the Chomskian sense. For one thing, linguists have recently insinuated that the

opening formula is not just *conventional*, but *inherent* in children's own way of creating narratives[144]. Story "conventions" such as opening formulae occur more often in school pupils than in preschoolers, which could suggest that it is an acquired convention. However, studies surprisingly suggest that children with weak text comprehension skills demonstrated comparable use of story "conventions" as other children, although the narratives they produce are weak both in terms of structural coherence and local cohesion. This indicates that knowledge of story structure does not depend on reading comprehension skills. The idea of opening a story by a formula seems not to depend on our acquisition of general reading skills. It seems not to be a convention we acquire, but a structure inherent in us from a certain age.

It is also this familiarity – or even universality – that allows the archetype of an opening to serve as a *prototype* for a number of variations, when the narrative turns from the oral to the written domain. In his reflections on opening lines, the German author Martin Walser claims that the author is *less responsible* for the first line, no doubt because he thinks of the weight of archetypes or conventions[145]. Yet, his comment is misleading in another sense because the weight of our universal understanding of opening is precisely what allows the author to control the reader's expectations. The slightest deviation from the formula makes it easy for the author to adjust or stir the reader's expectations; we are often more surprised by deviations from something familiar than by something entirely unfamiliar. This circumstance can be employed by the author to a certain effect, often inducing some level of irony. In John Barth's "Frame

[144] Kate Cain, "Text comprehension and its relation to coherence and cohesion in children's fictional narratives," *British Journal of Developmental Psychology* 21(2003).

[145] "für den ersten Satz ist der Autor noch weniger verantwortlich als für alle weiteren Sätze", Walser, "Erfahrungen mit ersten Sätzen oder Aller Anfang ist schwer," 155.

Tale" from *Lost in the Funhouse* the opening mode mocks the sway of the familiar opening by losing himself in the purely ritual situation:

> Once upon a time there was a story that began once upon a time…
>
> John Barth: *Frame Tale* (1969)

Barth's self-falsifying, "postmodern" Möbius-strip does not, however, work without previously established readerly expectations. If there were nothing to flout, it would not be interesting to try to flout it[146].

In my view, the central element of the archetypal opening "Once upon a time…" is, however, not the temporal indication, but the existential construction: "Once upon a time, *there was*". It is noteworthy for instance that this existential component begins the formula in most other languages than English where the temporal phrase comes first. In French, for instance: "il était une fois". After all, all narratives, I believe, presuppose the precedence of the events to the time of the storytelling – this is simply part of the narrative "contract". Michael Frayn's opening of *A Very Private Life* (1969) could indeed be read as a *reductio ad absurdum* of the belief that precedence is not a defining condition of narrative[147]:

> Once upon a time there will be a little girl called Uncumber.
>
> Michael Frayn: *A Very Private Life* (1969)

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[146] This is again a reference to the Gricean cooperative principle. In such openings there is a clear tension between authority and conventionality. The beginning asserts its own authority by evoking conventionality.

[147] This reflection and example is due to H. Porter Abbott, "The Future of All Future Narratives," in *A Companion to Narrative Theory*, ed. James Phelan and Peter J. Rabinowitz (Blackwell Publishing, 2005).

The passive, existential construction – "there was" – is neutral in terms of narrator and therefore more central to the opening mode than the temporal indication because the existential construction allows the positing of a character or a place without evoking problems about the initial perspective. The characters or places are introduced, as it were, *ex nihilo*, as an almost cosmologically given, as discussed in my first chapter. The formula indicates a fictional universe, with an existential phrase introducing the reader to its ontology. The literary opening is almost always proleptic in the sense that it introduces characters and situations, which will only later become well-rounded. Yet, contrary to cosmology, a book does not pretend that the universe it describes is created. Rather, the fictional universe is most effectively established when the universe appears to be entirely created and simply requires the reader to accept its textuality.

Many openings imitate more or less deliberately this archetypal existential construction, for instance Diderot's:

> Il y avait ici deux hommes qu'on pourrait appeler les Oreste et Pylade de Bourbonne
>
> Diderot: *Les Deux amis de Bourbonne* (1770)

Diderot's opening differs from the archetypal phrase by substituting "une fois" with "ici", introducing a narratorial and temporal presence, which the existential phrase otherwise neglects. Another example is Le Clézio's opening, which I discussed on page 26 and on page 78:

> Il y avait une toute petite fois, pendant le canicule, un type qui était assis devant une fenêtre ouverte…
>
> Le Clézio: *Le Procès verbal* (1963)

Here the "une fois" is transformed into "une toute petite fois", a surprising synthesis between two familiar expressions; the archetypal opening "il était une fois" is combined with an infantile dedramatization of an event: not "once upon a time", but "only once upon a time"[148]. This cosmological structure of the archetypal opening line may in fact echo in all openings, in one way or another, but as I shall show in my later discussion of "perspectival abruptness", there is a large historical shift from the use of existential openings towards openings that employ proverbs that are abrupt in terms of perspective.

If these introductory formulae often introduce layers of irony to the tale, it is because the reference to a familiar component being transformed is in fact one of the principal ways in which a narrative can signal its fictionality to the reader. As already mentioned, we can generally say that all fictions will either *pretend* to tell the truth about the actual world or *claim* to tell the truth about a fictional universe[149]. These signals are strong indications that fictional narratives are conceptually more complex than so-called natural narratives – which we could call "documentary narratives" – typically history and personal journals[150].

The familiarity of the introductory formula allows the reader to recognize the literary situation and the expectations to his or her interaction with the work. The formula is in this sense a device that permits the transition from one phase to another; as a two-headed "god" of beginnings – as Janus whom I mentioned in my prologue – who allows the reader to slip from the extratextual world to the fictional world.

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[148] Unfortunately there is no fully adequate translation in English of the French expression "une toute petite fois".

[149] Eco, "Fictional Protocols." Note also Nuttall's comment: "Literary beginnings group themselves with surprising clarity, either devoutly natural […] or as proudly artificial" in Nuttall, *Openings*: 204.

[150] I discuss these further on page 100.

5TH SIGNAL: A USE OF PERSPECTIVAL ABRUPTNESS

All these four techniques (individuality, trope of beginning, irony, formula) point to the necessity for an opening to exhibit or establish the text's status as fiction. Opening signals serve to direct the reader's expectations. These various techniques lead to our final technique, the use of what I call perspectival abruptness. This technique requires a great deal of discussion due to both its complexity and importance. In many ways, this discussion is the most critical aspect of the opening because it explains the significance also of the other techniques, even the use of a recognizable introductory formula like "once upon a time". Moreover, I shall devote a lot of attention to the signals of perspectival abruptness because historical shifts in literature can be read very directly off the shifts in the use of these signals. In other words, with this entry into openings, we can obtain results pertaining to the general historical direction of literature. In order to clarify this, I shall begin by differentiating between an opening's temporal abruptness (traditionally called "*in medias res*") and what I call "perspectival" abruptness.

WHEN IS AN OPENING "ABRUPT"?: UNDERSTANDING *IN MEDIAS RES* CORRECTLY

In medias res vs. ab ovo

In chapter 1, I showed that the question whether a work is to begin "abruptly" or "orderly" has always been central to the discussion of literature. I pointed out, for instance, that literary authorities throughout history – such as Horace, Ronsard, and Dante – have defended the principle of beginning *in medias res*. The question I now wish to ask is, however, whether an opening *in medias res* really is to be considered as an "abrupt" opening, or whether, on the

contrary, an opening *in medias res* rather supports the narrative's orderliness by providing symmetry and invoking an initial interest. This is an important question because we must understand the notion of *in medias res* correctly if we wish also to understand the abruptness of the modern novel. In order to resolve this question, I shall begin by considering the level of information provided by a narrative opening.

In classical rhetoric, it is common to distinguish between "rheme" and "theme"[151]. "Theme" applies to the information already known to the listener and "rheme" applies to the information that is new to the listener[152]. It is an important rule for a speaker always to combine *rheme* and *theme* in such a way that the listener is provided new information only if it is based upon information that is already familiar.

The distinction between *rheme* and *theme* is useful for highlighting the historical shifts in the level of information provided at the beginning of the narration. The Greek and Latin epics may begin *in medias res* – as I discussed in chapter 1 on p. 44 – but they rely on the information that the readers already have of the historical or mythical events. Of course the *Iliad* does not have to begin by the twin eggs (cf. *ab ovo*) because the listeners are already familiar with the genealogy of the Greek heroes and gods as well as with the events that led to the Trojan War. In

[151] The distinction is also used in modern linguistics, where "theme" applies to the subject matter of the clause and "rheme" to the information that develops the "theme". Cf. Michael Cummings, "The Role of Theme and Rheme in Contrasting Methods of Organization in Texts," in *The dynamics of language use : functional and contrastive perspectives*, ed. Christopher Butler, Maria A. Gomez-Gonzalez, and Susana Ma. Doval Suarez, *Pragmatics & Beyond* (Amsterdam ; Philadelphia: J. Benjamins Pub., 2005).

[152] This distinction corresponds quite well to my initial distinction between a narrative's "informative" and "seductive" principles.

terms of information, the opening *in medias res* did not signify abruptness, but on the contrary poetic harmony[153].

The novel, however, from *Don Quixote* up until today, deals precisely with characters and situations that are not already familiar to the readers. This makes it only natural that this relatively new genre will have to find its own correct balance between *rheme* and *theme*. Since the story is not familiar to the reader prior to the exposition, the beginning will have to guide the reader gently into the plot and will tend to introduce itself to the reader, for instance in terms of a teller-character[154]. In other words, the novel introduces an entirely unknown narrative and therefore it will have to confront the *ab ovo*, either by reverting to it or more radically by simply ignoring it.

The discrepancy between *ab ovo* and *in medias res* is significant precisely because, as we quoted Ford Madox Ford for saying, "life [does] not narrate"[155]. When we hear a story, whether "real" or fictional, we always hear it through someone – and that narrator faces a number of decisions when presenting the events. The narrator is constantly mediating between the *story* (the "what?") and the *presentation* (the "how?"), or what the Russian formalists have defined as "*fabula*" and "*sjuzhet*". The narrator may choose to present the story A→B→C by a straightforward A→B→C (*ab ovo*) but may also opt for some flashback by A→C→B or may altogether adopt the Horacian principle and open *in medias res* by B→C, which in practice often combines with some form of flashback, for instance B→A→C. The presentation may not open at

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[153] This idea is supported by Ronsard who allows only one exception to his general advice of opening midway: lyrical odes may begin "abruptly". Ronsard, "From A Brief on the Art of French Poetry." This indicates that the principle of the midway opening signifies poetic harmony, not abruptness.

[154] This arrangement of *rheme* and *theme* is susceptible to historical fluctuations, and it is noteworthy that a number of linguists have pointed to significant formal differences between 19th century literature and 20th century literature, which may help us make our historical observations about modernism more concrete, see chapter 3.

[155] Ford, *Critical writings*: 73.

the beginning; yet the fact that it does not, may not undermine the idea of a beginning. By paraphrasing the filmmaker Jean-Luc Godard, we could say: every text has to have a beginning, middle and end, but not necessarily in that order[156]. In chapter 1, I distinguished between the opening and the beginning of a text (p. 37). What we see now is that the "opening" belongs to the level of the presentation; the "beginning" to the level of the story.

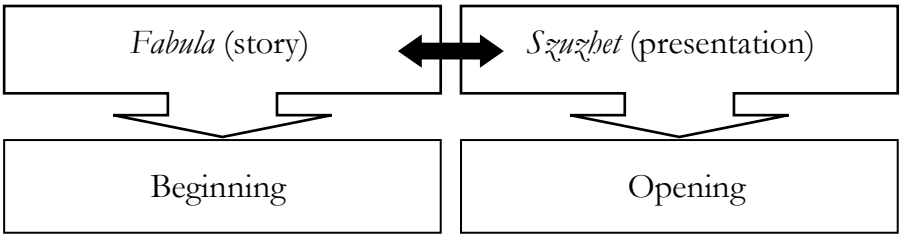

Figure 5: Opening and beginning belong to different levels of description

The opening may be the beginning (*ab ovo*), but it is not difficult to see why it may not be. In fact, it becomes quite evident how the presentation's opening in practice rarely pretends to be the story's beginning. The story is "the continuum of events presupposing the total set of all conceivable details, that is, those that can be projected by the normal laws of the physical universe", as Seymour Chatman puts it[157]. The presentation need not mention all the events that lay chronologically before the opening of the presented "plot", for instance the birth of the characters, yet the *story* must take account even of these events. Even when the narration does not mention the characters' births, the presentation will rest on a presupposition, for instance, that they were all born. Literary art is hence an art of presuppositions: the ability to read fiction

[156] "Every film has to have a beginning, middle end, but not necessarily in that order". "Godard only knows...", *The Observer*, 26 November 2000.

[157] Seymour Chatman, "Towards a Theory of Narrative," *New Literary History* 11(1975): 303.

rests on the ability to make what Chatman has called "a narrative projection", which allows the reader on the basis of these presuppositions to fill in the narration's unavoidable gaps.

The problem lies in the beginning: how does the reader move from his or her reality and into the field of fictionality with its necessity of "filling in the gaps". The truth is that our perception of reality also relies on a multitude of presuppositions that we do not constantly verify. Yet the reader will have to accept the mode of transmission of the story, and the narrative's beginning becomes so crucial because the first words of narrative will mould the reader's imaginative presuppositions and prepare it for a certain mode of transmission.

This marks an important difference between the historical and the fictional mode. As a philosopher of history, Arthur Danto, makes clear, sentences that include beginnings cannot help being narrative sentences[158]. Hence, in history, the central structure is also a narrative, but a narrative of a rather orthodox nature. It is noteworthy, for instance, that Claudius, an imperial Roman historian, feels an urge to break with Homer's structure and rewrite the entire Iliad *ab ovo*. This, I believe, can be explained by history's *deductive* nature. A basic narrative, with a beginning, middle, and end, logically resembles a basic deduction[159]:

F(a)
y
∴ G(a)

"a" is in the state of "F", then "y" happens, causing "a" to be a state of "G". The explanandum, that is, what needs to be explained by a historical account, automatically defines the beginning as

[158] "Each of these terms, to be true of an event E-1, logically requires the occurrence of an event temporally later than E-1, and sentences making use of such terms in the obvious way will then be narrative sentences.", Danto, *Analytical Philosophy of History*: 157.

[159] Ibid., 251.

the state "F" before "a" changed into its present state, "G". Due to the powerful analogy between the narrative structure and the deductive argument and the overall importance of the explanandum in history, it is characteristic of historical accounts that what they select as the beginning of a narrative is already determined by the end[160].

Therefore, a literary narrative can allow itself to be temporally "abrupt" in a way that historical accounts cannot. As Spenser notes in relation to the Faerie Queen: "[B]ecause the beginning of the whole work seemeth abrupte and as depending on other antecedents, it need that ye know … [that] the Methode of a Poet historical is not such, as of an Historiographer"[161]. A beginning will always rely on other antecedents, but in the case of a historical account, the beginning is determined by the end and this makes it less problematic to exclude a consideration of the antecedents of that beginning. In a literary context, however, where there is no deductive structure to respect, the beginning is not necessarily determined by the end. The beginning is therefore naturally abrupt in the sense that the antecedents seem always to come into consideration. For this reason, it becomes more natural and more harmonic to begin *in medias res*: to begin *ab ovo* becomes almost impossible since it involves a sort of infinite regress where one cannot ever exclude the consideration of further antecedents.

A novel is therefore caught between, on the one hand, the necessity to confront the antecedents through *ab ovo* and, on the other hand, the danger of slipping into an infinite regress when confronting those antecedents. In my view, this is the reason why literature is so enormously focused on *in medias res*: it can be employed as a technique that forcibly ignores the antecedents and jumps right into the action.

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[160] Ibid., 248.

[161] "A Letter of the Authors" in Edmund Spenser, Thomas P. Roche, and C. Patrick O'Donnell, *Edmund Spenser, The Faerie queene*, The English poets (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981).

Trollope is one novelist who dissects and reflects upon precisely this deceptive aspect of *in medias res*. He openly scorns the reader for wanting to jump "at once into the middle", when in fact it is not natural: "It is as though one were asked to eat boiled mutton after woodcocks, caviare, or macaroni cheese. I hold that it is better to have the boiled mutton first, if boiled mutton there must be…"[162].

With humorous reluctance, Trollope (or, rather, his implicit writer) accepts the reader's inclination: "I have always found […] that by rushing "*in medias res*" I was simply presenting the cart before the horse. But as readers like the cart the best, I will do it once again, – trying it only for a branch of my story, – and will endeavour to let as little as possible of the horse be seen afterwards"[163].

My claim is here that literary narratives are more powerful and credible precisely if "as little as possible of the horse is seen afterwards". A focus on the "cart" will eliminate the danger of the infinite regress of antecedents that I mentioned above. This is the reason why literary openings are often proleptic, thereby introducing characters and situations which only later become well-rounded. Contrary to the cosmologies that I discussed in chapter 1, a book should not pretend that the universe it describes is created. A natural beginning is actually, I argued, not the most reliable. Rather, the fictional universe is most effectively established when the universe appears to be entirely created and simply requires the reader to accept its textuality. I claim that, for this reason, prolepsis – and *in medias res* – makes it easier for the reader to embrace the fictionality. And this readerly acceptance of fictionality is the very key to the essence of fiction.

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[162] Anthony Trollope, *Is He Popenjoy?* (New York: Elibron Classics, 2005). 2.

[163] Anthony Trollope and Hermione Lee, *The Duke's children*, The Centenary edition of Anthony Trollope's Palliser novels (Oxford [Oxfordshire] ; New York: Oxford University Press, 1983). 70.

In other words, I have tried to explain how *in medias res* serves not just a purpose of "a bill of fare to the feast" or suspense in the name of literary "entertainment": it is logically easier for a narrative to be credible when it begins *in medias res*. Strictly speaking, in terms of communication, the abruptness of *in medias res* goes against the cooperative principle that Grice sets up (cf. p. 68). Compared to other texts, literary narratives are therefore unique because they tend to object to their own linearity[164]. Retardatory patterns are very common, and a literary text may even be conceived of as a dynamic system of gaps, in the way that Wolfgang Iser and the hermeneutically inspired reader-response school do.

PERSPECTIVAL ABRUPTNESS: THE "PAINFUL" BEGINNING

It is important to realize, however, that *in medias res* marks only one kind of opening abruptness. Strictly speaking, *in medias res* means no more than a certain chronological deformation at the beginning[165]. There is another way of rushing into the story, I claim, which has often been confused with *in medias res*: an abruptness which I call "perspectival", as opposed to the "temporal" abruptness of *in medias res*. This implies that abruptness is not just a question of chronology. An opening, which is temporally abrupt (*in medias res*), may be orderly in terms of perspective, and vice versa.

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[164] Cf. Hillis Miller and his thoughts on the refus du commencement in J. Hillis Miller, *Ariadne's thread story lines* (New Haven London: Yale University Press, 1992).

[165] Cf. Meir Sternberg, *Expositional Modes and Temporal Ordering in Fiction* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1978).

	Perspectivally abrupt	Perspectivally orderly
Temporally abrupt (*in medias res*)	Doubly abrupt	Abrupt in one aspect
Temporally orderly (*ab ovo*)	Abrupt in one aspect	Orderly

Figure 6: Abruptness is not just a question of chronology

For instance, an opening *in medias res* may be orderly in terms of perspective if, from the outset, it provides the reader with the narrative references and characterizations necessary for the reader to order the information at the opening. By contrast, an opening *in medias res* may be doubly abrupt if its narrative suspends the references and characterizations, thereby leaving the reader to construct both the chronology and the narrative perspective[166].

The perspective at the beginning determines whether the beginning is easy for the reader to enter: will the reader move smoothly into the story or be held at a distance? In Ernest Hemingway's "The Snows of Kilimanjaro", the protagonist, an author, says of his opening that "the marvelous thing is that it's painless […] That's how you know when it starts"[167]. But the question is precisely to what extent an opening really is "painless"? Let us consider, for instance, Hemingway's own opening of *The Old Man and the Sea* (1952):

> He was an old man who fished alone in a skiff in the Gulf Stream and he had gone eighty-four days now without taking a fish.
>
> Ernest Hemingway: *The Old Man and the Sea* (1952)

[166] Cf. Gilles Philippe, "Les démonstratifs et le statut énonciatif des textes de fiction : L'exemple des ouvertures de roman," *Langue Française* 120(1998).. In this article Philippe points out that *in medias res* paradoxically lets us wait to obtain the reference or characterization.

[167] Ernest Hemingway and Finca Vigía, *The Complete Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987). 39.

Although this sentence chronologically opens at the beginning, the reader nevertheless has a strong sense of abruptness. This is due to what I call perspectival abruptness. In this case, the pronoun "he" causes considerable confusion because the reader has not in any way been introduced to the protagonist.

The reason why the use of pronouns at the beginning is particularly noteworthy is that pronouns act as what linguists call 'sequence signals'[168]. This means that the use of pronouns will have to rely on something preceding them. It is a common literary technique to begin with the character, but in a literary opening, however, nothing precedes a pronoun, unless of course paratextual elements such as a title have helped introduce the main character, as in the case of the novels *Tristram Shandy* or *Germinie Lacertaux*. A personal pronoun that has not received a reference is perspectivally abrupt and must therefore immediately appeal to the reader's imaginative presuppositions. Perspectivally abrupt pronouns thus create a particular effect at the opening; the reader is not introduced to the character and his/her way into the story will consequently have to pass through other routes, such as initial astonishment, which may either distance the reader or stimulate a curiosity that will involve the reader in the story. The higher level of anonymity involved in the use of a perspectivally abrupt pronoun may furthermore change the reader's perception of the story's verisimilitude: characters may simply stay anonymous if we have no one to introduce them to us.

In this way, openings that contain perspectivally abrupt pronouns tend to be more "painful" for the reader (cf. Hemingway's mention of the painless beginning in "The Snows of Kilimanjaro"). This "pain", or initial disorientation, at the opening is precisely what helps pique

[168] Cf. Joseph M. Backus, ""He came into her line of vision walking backward": Nonsequential Sequence-signals in Short Story Openings," *Language Learning* XV, no. 1/2 (1965).

the reader's curiosity – unless, of course, the "pain" is so intense that it ends up by throwing the reader off. Just as in the case of the temporal abruptness of *in medias res*, the perspectival abruptness gives the reader "a sense of immediacy or involvement"[169].

In this regard, we are back to the central element of the Horacian principle: It may be more "painless" to begin by a full presentation of the character. However, central to the generation of literary interest is the tactics of withholding some of the story, which will force the reader to rely either on prior knowledge or on a willingness to imagine the narrative situation through fictional presuppositions.

This shared feature of temporal and perspectival abruptness may be the reason why scholars have so far not distinguished clearly between temporal and perspectival abruptness, as I recommend we do. Backus himself, for instance, does not define *in medias res* as a merely temporal phenomenon. What Backus fails to see is that the problem of abruptness is not just a problem of *in medias res*, but a question of the position of subjectivity[170]. For instance, in a perspectivally abrupt opening, an unintroduced pronoun lacks contextual information, which Gricean conventions of conversation would otherwise require. Such an opening lacks precisely what pragmaticians call "deictic center", or even more appropriately "*origo"*. The kind of opening which becomes common with modernism openly disrespects *origo*. By letting our thoughts return to the distinction between beginning and origin from the previous chapter, we can say: The modern opening tends to escape origin – and it does so by avoiding *origo*.

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[169] This is Backus' description of *in medias res*, ibid., 69. Backus, however, fails to distinguish perspectival abruptness from *in media res*. See my discussion on page 105 below.

[170] Ibid. Gilles Philippe has seen this problem quite clearly in his short, technical article, Philippe, "Les démonstratifs et le statut énonciatif des textes de fiction : L'exemple des ouvertures de roman."

This difference in the position of subjectivity can be illustrated by the difference in narratological perspective between what the Austrian narratologist Franz Stanzel calls a "teller-character" and a "reflector-character"[171]. The teller-character usually announces his or her presence in the opening sentences of the narrative and conveys to the reader the preliminary information necessary for the understanding of the story, that is to say, the teller-character deliberately leads the reader to the threshold of the story. The teller-character is in other words very conscious of the narrative setup that can lead the reader into the story. The reflector-character, on the contrary, is not conscious of the narrative situation; the story is not arranged by the character, but merely *reflected*. This reflection is more difficult for the reader to follow; the narrator does not assist the reader across the threshold of fiction and the literary opening will appear more abrupt or clipped. The reader is therefore left to establish the order of exposition her/himself and rely on his or her own presuppositions.

Meanwhile linguists as well as anthropologists have successfully isolated two perspectives: the emic and the etic. The etic is what is defined externally and extralinguistically whereas the emic is what is defined internally and structurally[172]. This well-established distinction indicates that Stanzel's distinction is viable also in a narrative context: The perspective of the teller-character is "etic", involving narrative preliminaries, an explicit introduction and an exposition that is oriented towards the reader. The reflector-character, on the other hand, is "emic", resulting in an abrupt or clipped opening that tends to rest on the reader's presuppositions and in which the reader will have to deduce the exposition[173].

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[171] Stanzel, *A Theory of Narrative*: 146.

[172] See for instance Roland Harweg, *Pronomina und Textkonstitution* (Münich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1968).

[173] Vance Smith has pointed out that medieval texts manage to formulate a difference between internal and external beginnings, which elucidates the schism between emic and etic. For more details see Smith, *The Book of the Incipit*:

The considerations will spell out my central schism between perspectivally abrupt and perspectivally orderly expositions in more detail:

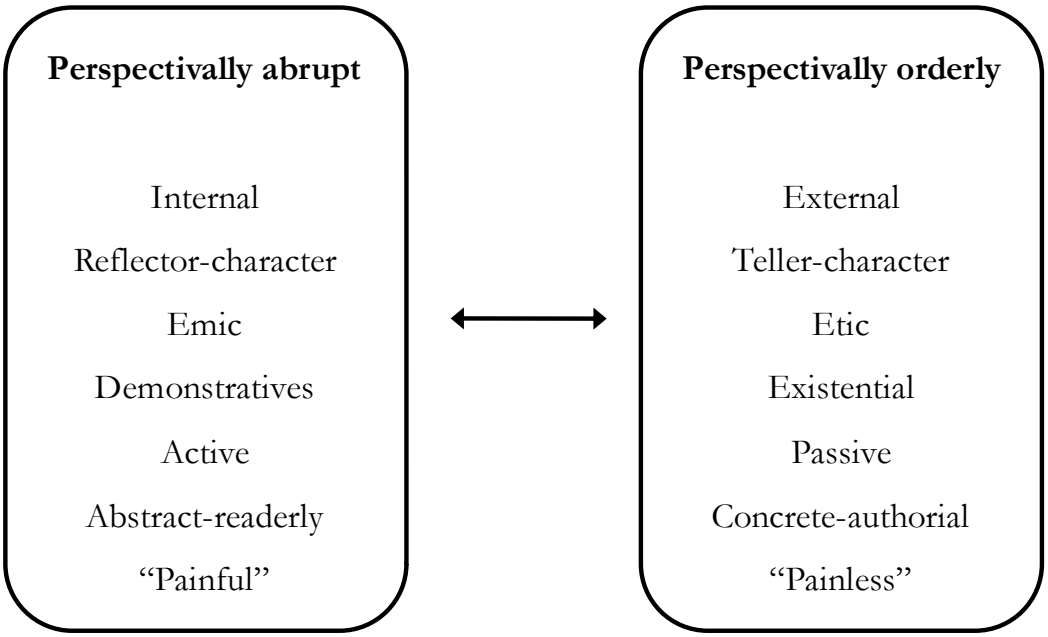

Figure 7: The central schism in perspectives

From this schism it also becomes apparent that the traditional distinction between heterodiegetic and homodiegetic narrations with which I began the chapter is not sufficient either. Two heterodiegetic narrations can be fundamentally different if one is based on a teller-character and the other is based on a reflector-character.

In order to illustrate this fundamental difference between two kinds of openings further – the externally based narrative relying on a teller-character and the internally based narrative

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220. This distinction has since been neglected and only recently renewed by the modern literary theorist Pierre Macherey's thoughts on literary production, cf. Pierre Macherey, *Pour une théorie de la production littéraire*, Théorie, 4 (Paris,: F. Maspero, 1966). See also Harweg, *Pronomina und Textkonstitution*. Géard Genette also evokes the difference between the emic and etic in chapter 11 of his Genette, *Nouveau discours du recit*.

relying on a reflector-character – I shall now focus on the use of two personal pronouns at the beginning of novels; the first-person pronoun "I" and the third-person pronoun "he". The two pronouns do of course naturally create two very different presentations: one will be a first-person narrative, the other a third-person narrative. But I shall here discuss the difference in information attached to the pronouns: does the reader have enough information to identify the character – or is the effect that of deliberate confusion? Moreover, to what extent could we trace a historical shift in the information provided at the beginning?

For these questions we can refer to work done by the German linguist Georg Bossong who has statistically demonstrated a historical shift from what he calls "canonical" to "acanonical" openings. Canonical openings use an existential claim, which serves to introduce a place or character, for instance, "there was a man" etc. (canonical openings therefore implicitly evoke "once upon a time" because of its existential claim: "Il était une fois"). Acanonical openings, on the other hand, rely on a subject that is implicitly presupposed, for instance Jahnn's *Perrudja* which opens "Perrudja aß seine Abendmahlzeit", "Perrudja ate his evening meal". Jahnn's title *Perrudja* does of course help to introduce the scene, but otherwise the scene is entirely unknown to the reader, who has no temporal or spatial guidance; the only thing the reader knows is that Perrudja is probably the name of the story's protagonist. Bossong points out that the use of proper names is far more common is the 19th century than for instance the 15th or 16th century. This shift is in other words a change in the verb/subject priority; with the canonical opening the verb is used to introduce the subject, whereas the acanonical opening will use a proper name that precedes the verb. In the 19th century the emphasis is in other words on the subject whose proper name is introduced without much ado. In fact it is striking how many

novels of the 19th century carry a proper name in its title, think of *Germinie Lacertaux* by the Goncourts and the novels by Balzac.

Although emerging in the 19th century, the opening with a proper name (the proprial opening) remains popular also amongst naturalists and 20th century avant-garde. A quick, indicative list of authors using the proprial opening is: Trollope, George Eliot, Conrad, Henry James, Achebe, Theodore Dreiser, Jahnn, Joyce, Kafka, and Woolf.

The attraction of the proprial opening is evident if we remember John Stuart Mill's definition of a proper name: A proper name shows us "what thing it is that we are talking about, but [does not tell] anything about it"[174]. In other words, proper names are in Mill's view not connotative; but denotative[175]. The proper name therefore lives perfectly up to the two principles of literary openings by which I began this chapter: the informative and the seductive principles. The proper name both *informs us*, by *showing* someone, and *withholds information*, by *not telling us* anything about the shown person[176].

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[174] John Stuart Mill, *System of Logic; Ratiocinative and Inductive* (New York: Elibron Classics, 2005). 1. ii. 5.

[175] In novels, certain proper names do, however, often become deliberately connotative, for instance in the novels of Dickens and in Balzac's Madame Bovary.

[176] Given their pseudo-informative nature, proper names have within analytic philosophy been called "rigid designators". In *Naming and Necessity*, Kripke has explained that a proper name derives its (denotative) meaning from a series of actions which can be causally traced back to an initial "baptism". Saul A. Kripke, *Naming and necessity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1980). In the case of fiction, the question who has made this "baptism" remains even more complex. From the point of view of the reader, the baptism seems implausible.

Type:	Existential opening	Proper name (proprial opening)	Pronominal opening
Period:	15/16th century-	19th century	20th century
Example:	"There was…"	"Madame Vauquer…" (Balzac)	"He was an old man who…" (Hemingway)

Figure 8: Historical transition in openings

20th century literature continues this movement away from the existential claims and makes the subject even more implicitly presupposed. It is a move from the external to the internal; the focalization, as the narratologists call it, becomes internal[177]. The first-person narrative may be used less in the 20th century, but there is nevertheless a considerable innovation in the genre due to this perspectivally abrupt use of the first-person pronoun, which leaves the reader without a proper introduction to the narrator. This also emphasizes the 20th century concern with the distinction between author and persona[178].

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[177] Genette mentions a change in external to internal focalization in the 19th Century, Gérard Genette, "Discours du récit," in *Figures III* (Paris: Seuil, 1972), 207-08. "Il est fréquent dans les textes littéraires antérieurs au XXe siècle que le récit soit présenté comme la transcription d'un récit oral supposé avoir été raconté au narrateur ou en sa présence."

[178] It is, for instance, important to contrast openings of first-person narratives like Melville's "Call me Ishmael" with Frisch's "I'm not Stiller" and Proust: "Longtemps je me suis couché de bonne heure". Note also Backus' reflection: "While twentieth century writers use the "I" less often than earlier ones, they tend to be more concerned with the distinction between author and persona". Backus, ""He came into her line of vision walking backward": Nonsequential Sequence-signals in Short Story Openings," 73. The shift to proper names and then to non-sequence indicates a surge in individuality followed by a crisis in subjectivity as I have previously discussed in my two articles: Niels Buch-Jepsen, "What Happened to the Author? Modernist Impersonality and Authorial Selfhood," in *From Homer to Hypertext: Studies in Narrative, Literature and Media*, ed. Hans Balling and Anders Klinkby Madsen (Odense: University Press of Southern Denmark, 2002); Niels Buch-Jepsen, "Le nom propre et le propre

In the case of third-person narratives, the move to the perspectivally abrupt introduction of a subject appears even more radical. When a pronoun like “he” or “she” is used in the opening without further introduction, it creates a very special effect on the reader, as in the below examples:

> She waited, Kate Croy, for her father to come in, but he kept her unconsciously, and there were moments at which she showed herself, in the glass over the mantel, a face positively pale with the irritation that had brought her to the point of going away without the sight of him.
>
> Henry James: *The Wings of the Dove* (1902)

> As a junior of exceptional promise, he had been sent to Egypt for a year in order to improve his Arabic and found himself attached to the High Commission as a sort of scribe to await his first diplomatic posting;
>
> Lawrence Durrell: *Mountolive* (1958)

> He was an old man who fished alone in a skiff in the Gulf Stream and he had gone eighty-four days now without taking a fish.
>
> Hemingway: *The Old Man and the Sea* (1958)

This mode of opening is more radical than one initially imagines it. Let us compare an opening of an early novel by Thomas Mann, *Der Zauberberg* (1924) with that of a later novel *Das Gesetz* (1944):

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auteur - qu'est-ce qu'une fonction-auteur?," in *Une histoire de la fonction-auteur est-elle possible?*, ed. Nicole Jacques-Lefévre (Saint-Etienne: Publications de l'Université de Saint-Etienne, 2001). If the story begins by a first-person pronoun that introduced a third-person pronoun in a perspectivally abrupt fashion then the reader’s feeling is that the speaker is withholding information.

> Ein einfacher junger Mensch reiste im Hochsommer von Hamburg, seiner Vaterstadt, nach Davos-platz im Graubündischen.
>
> Thomas Mann: *Der Zauberberg* (1924)

> Seine Geburt war unordentlich, darum liebte er leidenschaftlich Ordnung, das Unverbrüchliche, Gebot und Verbot.
>
> Thomas Mann: *Das Gesetz* (1944)

The first opening is not an existential phrase, but the indefinite subject makes the sentence function almost as if it were: logicians would render Mann's sentence as an existential claim followed by a description: "there is a young man and that young man traveled etc". Notice that the subsequent naming of that subject becomes very easy: 1. there is a man 2. that man traveled etc 3. that man was called x. The naming becomes easy because the existential claim at the beginning makes the reader aware of the teller-character who first "invents" the character by claiming his existence and therefore subsequently naming him.

In Mann's second opening things are more complicated indeed: "Seiner" is perspectival abrupt and without an existential claim we almost feel an inclination to ask "who?", especially since we are witnessing his very birth. We get the impression that the narrator is either deliberately withholding information or that s/he builds on information that readers are supposed already to know. Even in this birth scene there is no existential claim; the existence of the main character is taken for granted even before the novel begins. We notice that the lack of existential claims also makes the naming far more awkward; if the narrator presupposes (if misinformed about the reader's knowledge) or wants to presuppose (that is, if s/he is "unreliable" as the literary term goes) that the reader knows the character why would it ever be necessary to introduce the name? "His birth was chaotic. His name was x" is awkward whereas "there was a

man whose birth was chaotic. His name was x" is acceptable. The opening of *Das Gesetz* is therefore particularly frustrating; Mann uses the scene of a birth as the natural beginning of a story and it begins with an immediate awkwardness that prevents even the naming of the character who has just been born.

To note the use of these perspectivally abrupt pronouns at the opening of a novel becomes illuminating to literary history. Perspectivally abrupt pronouns in the first lines were very rare before 1880, but then get used by two very different kinds of authors. The naturalists occasionally begin to use the perspectivally abrupt pronouns, possibly as an indication that life does not introduce the characters. Presumably the desired effect would not primarily be to stimulate the reader's curiosity, but to enhance a feeling of verisimilitude; there is no special indication of a beginning. The pioneer in the use of perspectival abruptness is otherwise Henry James. His motivations would presumably be altogether different from that of the naturalists. Perspectival abruptness would to him rather serve as a psychological realism that would seize the reader. In both cases, however, the "painful" opening tends to serve in the name of realism, and this is important to remember when we notice in which historical period the use of the pronominal openings culminates. Backus concludes on the basis of statistical material that apart from Henry James and some little-known authors before 1925, the majority of authors using this opening strategy write from 1925 and up, culminating around 1945. Backus singles out in particular Ernest Hemingway, whose openings we have already discussed, as the master and culmination of the pronominal opening. Moreover, we notice that the pronominal opening is more common when part of a first-person narrative such as Conrad's *Chance*:

> I believe he had seen us out of the window coming off to dine in the dignity of a fourteen-ton yawl belonging to Marlow my host and skipper.
>
> Joseph Conrad: *Chance* (1913)

The central distinction when it comes to the perspectivally abrupt is that enonciative continuation is not just referential continuation.

Thus, the 20th century novel tends to move away from the use of the proper name in its opening, which despite various exceptions generally characterized the 19th century novels. Instead it moves towards a wider use of a personal pronoun at the beginning. When at the same time we think of the 20th century literary avant-garde's vision of establishing an art entirely without proper names[179], we may be able to explain the disappearance of proper names at the beginning of novels as no less than a concrete symptom of the crisis of humanist subjectivity that dominated 20th century intellectual life[180]. With a personal pronoun, focus shifts from the individuality and social position of the character to the function of the persona in the overall construction.

What is more, the use of the perspectivally abrupt pronoun, especially in third-person, draws further attention to the novel's very fictionality. We can fairly easily accept an opening that contains a proper name like "Mr. Hansen got up from the table" or even one containing a perspectivally abrupt first-person pronoun: "I got up from the table". The perspectivally abrupt third person pronoun seems rather different: "He got up from the table". A novel may of course begin like that, but there is a fundamental difference. The first two constructions make it possible

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[179] Barthes: un roman "sans noms propres" and Valéry: une histoire littéraire "sans noms propres". Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* (Paris: Seuil, 1975). 110. For a discussion of Valéry on this stand, see chapter 4.

[180] See footnote 178 with references to my two articles on subjectivism in the 20th century. This issue will be discusssed in more detail in the next chapter.

for the reader to locate a teller-character who could begin a report or a journal; in fact, these two openings could be non-fictional as well as fictional, and this analogy with the non-fictional makes the opening less conspicuous. I could for that matter begin an insurance claim by "I got up from the table", just as the insurance company could begin their report "Mr. Hansen got up from the table". What about "he got up from the table"? Opening a text by a perspectivally abrupt third-person pronoun does simply not seem possible in a non-fictional text; the reader cannot locate a teller-character who presents the story. Left with only a reflector-character, no analogy to non-fictional texts can be found and the opening will appear abrupt. This leads to a somewhat surprising conclusion. Far from being confined to fictional texts, a teller-character can be central even to non-fictional texts; in fact, the naturalness of an opening with teller-character stems precisely from the possibility that the text could be non-fictional. As a result, we must conclude that the teller-character may be more natural, but less literary whereas the reflector-character is less natural, but more literary: texts dominated by a reflector-character can only be fictional.

When the 20th century novel tends to employ a perspectivally abrupt opening, it is therefore not just a question of reformulating subjectivism, but of drawing further attention to the novel's own literarity. The pronominal opening is abrupt because the reader is left with no mediator between his own world and the world of the text in front of him; something is immediately presupposed and the reader will have to activate his or her narrative imagination in a more radical fashion.

Although the narrative incipit prior to the 20th century in this way could be said to be more "natural", we notice that its naturalness stems most often from the presence of a teller-character who presents the story through either an existential claim ("There was a man…") or, as was later the tendency, through a proper name such as Zola's typical openings, for instance:

Claude passait devant l'hôtel de ville

Zola: *l'Œuvre* (1885)

By introducing the character in this way, these openings will therefore be different from the body of the text, and we could therefore say that 18th and 19th century openings despite their "naturalness" in fact formally stand out from the rest of the text[181]. Although we may tend to think of 20th century openings as more "radical", formally they differentiate themselves *less* from the rest of the text. 20th century openings increasingly open with, as we have seen, perspectivally abrupt pronouns or with direct discourse (as Rebecca West: *The Return of the Soldier* mentioned above on p. 74) and the reader will therefore not be less able to tell formally whether the extract by which the novel opens is in fact an opening. In a sense, it is not that the 20th century opening is abrupt in itself; rather the reader will *experience* it as abrupt precisely because it does not stand out from the rest of the text.

The paradoxical observation is that the more an opening looks like the rest of the text, the more likely will it be that it looks different from other openings; such an opening will naturally rely less on certain conventional modes of opening and there is hence more room for differentiation. If the modern author could be said to be more "nervous" about the opening it may be due to precisely this higher possibility of differentiation. Hans Henny Jahnn's concern with the opening sentence does, in any case, seem typical: "I had definitely rewritten the first sentence of Perrudja at least 50 times and endlessly turned it back and forth, until it simply went:

[181] It therefore seems incorrect when Aldo Nemesio argues that the narrative incipit in 18th and 19th century novels does not present specific characteristics capable of differentiating it from the body of the text. Aldo Nemesio, "La definizione dell'Incipit," *Annali d'Italianistica* 18(2000). Nemesio's conclusion that the focus of research for that reason should not be the text itself but readers' response to reading the initial words therefore also seems flawed.

'Perrudja ate his evening meal' "[182]. Fewer conventions guide the opening of the novel, and they therefore relate to each other in a different way than previously. In the presence of certain formulaic modes of opening, any particular opening will relate not so much to other texts as to certain generic conventions of opening. When these formulaic modes of opening lose their importance, the opening will relate less to the conventions and more to specific prior texts, which the opening positions itself against. This difference is central to our conception of intertextuality, as I shall discuss in chapter 3 and illustrate in chapter 4.

The striking thing about open beginnings is that they tend to generate open endings, in the sense that they contain little resolution. Stanzel has shown that structurally speaking a narrative opening with a reflector-character will generally lead to an open ending[183]. When no particular direction is adopted from the outset, the modalities of a possible resolution are not clearly defined. It is in other words the beginning that sets out the criteria for the possible later *dénouement*. If a beginning fails to set these criteria, it is not clear that they will ever be set out. This observation may explain the importance that Aristotle attaches to finding the correct starting point because the middle and end will simply follow from the beginning[184]. When modern writers deliberately try to evade the generic conventions of the novelistic opening, it is done in the conscience that this will change the novel's overall rhetorical structure, and a writer like Claude Simon can therefore willingly accept his critics' claim that his novels have "neither a beginning nor an end"[185]. Consequently the sense of plot tends to break down in certain novels,

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[182] Walter Muschg, *Gespräche mit Hans Henny Jahnn* (Frankfurt am Main: Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 1967). 123, my translation.

[183] Stanzel, *A Theory of Narrative*: 163.

[184] Aristotle, "Poetics," 96.

[185] Simon, "Discours à Stockholm".

but a stronger reliance on the consciousness of the reader will secure a higher degree of fictionality, which will preserve the work's narrative quality[186]. Again, fictionality can be seen as the defining quality of the 20th century novel and we can repeat what Quentin Anderson has said about Henry James who was, we will remember, one of the first to use perspectivally abrupt pronouns at the novel's opening: "The reader's initial assumptions are quite as much the matter of his story as the situation itself"[187].

TOWARDS THE CONCLUSION: THE OPENING AS THE KEY TO THE WORK

Perspectival abruptness makes the opening more like the rest of the text; and it thereby appears more "arbitrary" – more "open". And when an opening looks more like the rest of the text, it may look more distinct from other openings and it thus loses some of the conventional relation to other openings. By making the opening more "open" by using perspectival abruptness, the opening also tends to become more inscrutable and more individual.

The opening therefore becomes doubly important when modern novels employ the perspectival abruptness. First, the opening becomes more distinct in itself by being progressively unleashed from the conventions of openings and, second, it increasingly becomes a key to the whole work as such. The opening determines the parameters of reading, and the opening page becomes a key to the work that will unfold in the light of it. This is what authors increasingly have become aware of since Theodor Fontane noted in 1880 at the brink of the naturalistic period: "The first chapter is always what is most important and in the first chapter it is the first

[186] This is a point also made by Monika Fludernik in her Monika Fludernik, *Towards a 'Natural' Narratology* (London: Routledge, 1996). Contrast also with Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative*.

[187] Henry James, *Selected short stories; edited with an introd. by Quentin Anderson*, Rinehart editions, 31 (New York,: Rinehart, 1950).

page. […] The right structure (Aufbau) always puts the germ of the whole in the first page"[188]. Just like in Fontana's novels, even those clinging on to conventions know that the conventions have broken down.

This tendency is further enforced in the 20th Century. A theorist like Serge Doubrovsky refers to the first sentence of Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu* as a "generator" of the work through the interplay between the novel's two first persons (what in semiotics is called "referent" and "référé")[189]. The German novelist Martin Walser has written an entire essay in 1994 about the first sentence in which he claims that the first sentence is pivotal to the work: "The entire novel is nothing but a development from the [first] sentence. In this sense, the novel does not progress. It consists of variations of the opening"[190]. In his provocative mood, Walser is aware that the parameters are determined by the opening: "The novel is always a game, but the first sentence adamantly determines how the game is to be played"[191]. The tendency is that each text determines its own parameters instead of resting on already existing conventions. For this reason I shall in the next chapter look more closely at conventions vs. intertextuality.

Moreover, the fact that the beginning is increasingly a "key" to the work is further supported by the phenomenon I discussed above that open beginnings tend to lead to open endings. As Aragon puts it: "Un sentier n'a pas nécessairement de fin, il peut s'effacer, il

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[188] "Das erste Kapitel ist immer die Hauptsache und in dem ersten Kapitel die erste Seite. [...] Bei richtigem Aufbau muß in der ersten Seite der Keim des Ganzen stecken" Fontane cited in Gunter H. Hertling, *Theodor Fontanes Irrungen, Wirrungen, Die 'Erste Seite' als Schlüssel zum Werk* (Frankfurt a. M.: Peter Lang, 1985). 7.

[189] Serge Doubrovsky, *La Place de la Madeleine: Ecriture et fantasme chez Proust* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1974).

[190] "Der ganze Roman ist dann nur eine Entfaltung (videreudvikling) dieses Satzes. Der Roman kommt sozusagen nicht vorwärts. Er besteht aus Variationen des Anfangs." Walser, "Erfahrungen mit ersten Sätzen oder Aller Anfang ist schwer," 159.

[191] Ibid., 162. My translation of "Der Roman ist zwar immer ein Spiel, aber der erste Satz entscheidet unerbittlich, wie diesmal gespielt werden soll".

s'efface. Il a nécessairement un commencement"[192]. With this in mind, it appears that beginnings have historically become increasingly more important, and grown more important than endings – by turning Kermode's title on its head I propose that rather than "a sense of an ending" we need "a sense of a beginning". I shall expand upon my position in relation to Kermode in the next chapter on intertextuality and historization.

CONCLUSION: IS LITERATURE "COOPERATIVE"?

At the beginning of this chapter I evoked Grice's cooperative principle. It stated that in normal communication our interaction is based on a mutual agreement that the interlocutors are cooperating. As Grice himself was aware this principle does not hold in literature, but nevertheless the principle is illustrative of many of the mechanisms that take place in literature. Literature is also cooperative, but in a different sense because it serves a different purpose. For one thing, literary communication is not measured according to relevance in the same way as ordinary communication. In fact, it will often blatantly flout the cooperative principle of normal communication. On the basis of the discussion in this chapter, it therefore appears that there is a higher-level "literary cooperative principle" with its own maxims, which I have established via my investigation into the taxonomy of openings:

1. It is cooperative to signal a narrative's fictionality. The sooner this is done, the sooner a narrative can be allowed to flout the general cooperative principle of communication.
2. An opening is as informative "as necessary", but not "too informative"

[192] Aragon, *Les incipit*: 90.

3. Narrative events precede us
4. Abruptness is to be expected in narrative
5. Narrative is based on postulated existence (cf. Cain)
6. There is a narrator
7. The story is individual
8. Beginning is artificial (includes irony)
9. Narration is aware that truth condition is somewhat different (realism).
10. Narratives verisimilitude depends on the narrator's credibility, not reality effects.
11. Truth is not referential, but relational and conventional (cf. Lewis, see below).

We must not understand "truth" in literature as properties of the literary sentences themselves. In the case of natural languages, the analytic philosopher David Lewis has shown that "truth" is not a property of sentences, but rather consists of relations between sentences and language as a whole[193]. The use of language therefore rests on conventions of truthfulness and trust amongst members of the population. This is relevant to our understanding of literature as well. We can treat literature as a language in itself with its own conventions based on "trust". We therefore must not look for referentiality of literary sentences because this will lead us to think that there is no such thing as truth in literature[194].

With this in mind let us now turn to conventions and intertextuality in my next chapter focusing on modernism.

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[193] David K. Lewis, *Convention: a philosophical study* (Cambridge,: Harvard University Press, 1969).

[194] Which may lead some to end up in notions of pure textuality, as poststructuralism has sometimes been accused of expounding.

– CHAPTER 3 –

Beginnings and Modernity:

A History of Openings

"Oh, oui, me dis-je, bientôt tout sera terminé"

The Opening of Céline's *Nord*

OPENING VS. ENDINGS

In my prologue, I outlined the tendency in Anglo-American literary criticism to focus on endings rather than openings. In this chapter I wish to relate this tendency specifically to considerations of literary modernism and its definition. As I shall endeavor to show, modernism can be characterized by its tendency to define itself by distancing itself from "static" notions like origins and traditions in favor of "dynamic" notions like beginnings and originality. Moreover, in this chapter on modernism I wish to illustrate that one's conception of beginnings in many ways defines one's general literary outlook as well as one's conception of literary history. While doing so, I wish to retain a skeptical attitude towards what I call the "clichés of modernism". That is to say, I would like to isolate the genuine *formal* traits of modernism from the flourishing, preconceived and "ideological" ideas of what modernism is or is not. In order to do so, I shall point out that the methodology of literary criticism in its very outlook is largely influenced by literature itself – a certain kind of criticism can also in itself be called "modernist". And if we look at literature through the lens of a modernist criticism, all literary texts will tend to look

modernist – just as the lens of postmodernist criticism will tend to render all literary texts postmodernist.

I begin by discussing the notion of death and the influence that this notion has had both on beginnings and on critics who have dealt with the central schism between openings and endings. In particular, I wish to discuss the two seminal works of Peter Brooks (*Reading for the Plot*) and Frank Kermode (*The Sense of an Ending*). As can be seen simply from the title of my dissertation, "The Sense of a Beginning", Kermode's book has been a particularly central text when planning this dissertation. Since I deliberately turn Kermode's central phrase on its head by claiming that the opening is (the) key to the work, it would only be natural to position this dissertation in relation to Kermode's thoughts – and I shall do this by looking at the characteristics of modernism in terms of openings. In particular I shall involve the structuralist thinking of Roland Barthes and Julia Kristeva and the poetics of Aragon and Martin Walser as well as use the literary examples of Conrad and other writers. On the basis of these observations I shall reach a notion of "modernist criticism", with which I shall turn to another seminal book, Edward Said's *Beginnings*. Since Said's book does not provide an insight into concrete literary openings, which by contrast this dissertation aims to provide, I shall focus instead on the notions that Said's book expresses at the critical level. Inevitably the chapter will touch on the notions of intertextuality and influence, which inspired the structuralist thinking on which Said's book rests.

DEATH AND THE DESIRE FOR FINALITY

If, as my previous chapters have shown, *beginnings* are either ironically natural ("I am born", etc.) or wholly artificial ("The marquise went out at five o'clock"), *endings* may, at least at first, seem to possess a different solidity. It is characteristic that the critics and novelists who have

been preoccupied with endings, point to death as a human condition that creates a narrative desire for finality. For instance, Joseph Conrad, in his famous essay on Henry James, writes:

> [Conventional novelistic] solutions are legitimate inasmuch as they satisfy the desire for finality, for which our hearts yearn, with a longing greater than the longing for the loaves and the fishes of this earth. Perhaps the only true desire of mankind, coming thus to light in its hours of leisure, is to be set at rest[195].

In this passage, Conrad insinuates than a novel's ending not just mimics death, but reflects a universal longing for death both in the conception and reception of the literary work. The literary reflection of death is in other words not just formal or structural, but appears to be subordinated to non-literary patterns in the writer or reader. If so, our conception of a novelistic ending would be double: While reading, we long for the ending in order to be set at rest. Yet, it is important that this desire for finality is present *from the outset* and directs our reading. In fact, the story's finality satisfies a desire that even precedes the story itself, a desire that only came to be directed by the story.

I believe that this is the observation that has led a number of prominent literary scholars to proclaim that the story at any given point points towards its own ending, its own death; that the entire story depends on its ending. The classic formulation of this view is Walter Benjamin's famous words from "The Storyteller": "Death is the sanction of everything the storyteller can tell. He has borrowed his authority from death"[196]. In his influential book *Reading for the Plot,* Peter Brooks uses Benjamin when exclaiming that: "The telling is always *in terms* of the

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[195] Joseph Conrad, "Henry James: An Appreciation," in *Notes on Life and Letters* (London: Dent, 1924 (1905)), 18-19.

[196] Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller," in *Theory of the novel : a historical approach*, ed. Michael McKeon (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 84.

impending end"[197]. According to this view, finality is what lends authority to the story. The ending is therefore at all times present in our interaction with the text:

> We read the incidents of narration as 'promises and annunciations' of final coherence, that metaphor that may be reached through the chain of metonymies: across the bulk of the as yet unread middle pages, the end calls to the beginning, transforms and enhances it[198].

The ending is therefore precisely what establishes the semantic situation of the reading: "the revelation of meaning […] occurs when the narrative sentence reaches full predication"[199]. Brooks' method of reading could therefore be characterized by what he calls: "anticipation of retrospection"[200], a method which bears a striking resemblance to Kermode's as described below. Both Brooks and Kermode describe our reading by a recursive method by which the end is constantly projected when reading. The very beginning points to the ending.

I claim that in many ways Brooks' and Kermode's perspectives are not as innovative as they may seem, since they are in fact on a par with Aristotle's classic notion of dramatic harmony. According to Aristotle, the ending makes "possible a satisfying consonance with the origins and with the middle", thereby giving "meaning to lives and to poems"[201]. Brooks' and Kermode's recursive method differs from Aristotle, however, by seeing the ending as a projection, whose semantic effectiveness may not stem from the text alone. According to

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[197] Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative*: 52.

[198] Ibid., 93-94.

[199] Ibid., 20.

[200] Ibid., 23.

[201] Aristotle quoted in Jane Yellowless Douglas, *The End of Books - Or Books without End? Reading Interactive Narratives* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000). 91.

Kermode, we as readers create "our own sense of an ending" by making "considerable imaginative investments in coherent patterns"[202]. As the critic Yellowless Douglas puts it: "Like Brooks's 'anticipation of retrospection', Kermode's act of reading is endlessly recursive, continually building a structure that presupposes an ending that in turn modifies the building of the structure"[203]. This means that the actual ending of a text may in fact end up annulling the reader's predictions of the outcome.

Faced with this insight, it may be beneficial to analyze the reader's prejudiced expectations more systematically. This has been done for instance by the theorist Richard Ohmann, who tried to erect the prejudiced expectations of the ordinary reader into rules based on Austin's ideas of illocutionary acts[204]. Yet, it is important to realize that this potential annulment of narrative predictions in no way constitutes a breach of the narrative model. On the contrary, according to Kermode it is a fundamental condition of literature that predictions and expectations can be invalidated – very much in the way that my previous chapter described the mechanisms of the "cooperative principle" in literature and how literature often failed to "cooperate". On this point Kermode and I concur, and I hope that my introduction of the cooperative principle into the literary debate would further illustrate that a lack of closure is in reality not a breach of the literary "contract".

However, my position on literary texts differs from that of Kermode and Brooks as I object to their recursive method in three ways:

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[202] Kermode quoted in ibid., 92.

[203] Ibid.

[204] Richard Ohmann, "Speech, Action, and Style," in *Literary Style: A Symposium*, ed. Seymour Chatman (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971).

1. It appears plausible that for a great number of novels, we can rely on our projection of the ending. Yet, Kermode and Brooks do not take into consideration that open beginnings tend to create open endings, which become inconceivable to project. Therefore there would clearly be works where the opening serves as the key itself. If beginnings cannot be considered as a universal exegetic tool, why should endings?

2. Is the recursive method universal – or is it tied to particular texts and periods, say, modern texts? Kermode is not quite clear on this point, but in different passages, he seems to insinuate that his method is specially applicable to modern, more "self-reflexive" works:

> Readings of such books are necessarily recursive. The best reader in the world cannot get much out of the beginning of *The Good Soldier*, or of *The Sound and the Fury*, unless he goes back to it and codes it in accordance with later discoveries. So good reading, even first reading, is recursive and can be required to be so in a high degree. The more self-reflexive the text, the more recursion is necessary and the harder it is to code information unequivocally[205].

By making such claims about 20th Century literary works, Kermode is in clear line with a number of theorists who see recursion as emblematic for modernism. James Joyce's oeuvre, arguably modernism's climax, is for instance being described in this way by the theorist Joseph Frank: "Joyce cannot be read – he can only be reread" and Frédérique

[205] Frank Kermode, "Novels: Recognition and Deception," *Critical Inquiry* 1, September(1974): 119.

Chevillot conceives in a similar fashion of a number modernist works in his book *Réouverture du texte*[206].

If modernist books tend to make the beginnings opaque, it may, however, not be the case that the entry into the text is made possible by making a projection of the ending. It could be that this "refus du commencement" instead deserves analysis and attention in order to unravel the literary work.

3. We should not underestimate the concepts that we have inherited. While Brooks' and Kermode's perspective appears persuasive, it is important to realize that it underestimates the weight of linguistic and textual conventions as well as intertextuality; it ignores the idea that our reading is shaped and determined by concepts which we inherit. As Stanley Fish explains: "Meanings come already calculated … not because of norms embedded in language but because language is always perceived, from the very first, within a structure of norms … a structure, however, [that] is not abstract and independent but social"[207].

I wish to point out that we are here back to the central schism between Anglo-American and "continental" thinking as we encounter it first and foremost in the discipline of epistemology: Schematically speaking, the continental tradition of philosophy emphasizes the existence of categories that are prior to our experience, created via socialization or existing innately, whereas the Anglo-American tradition emphasizes our dependence on the *a posteriori* interaction with the world. Similarly, Kermode and Brooks rely on the conception

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[206] Joseph Frank, "Spatial Form in Modern Literature," in *The Widening Gyre : Crisis and Mastery in Modern Literature* (New Brunswick NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1963); Frédérique Chevillot, *La réouverture du texte. Balzac, Beckett, Robbe-Grillet, Roussel, Aragon, Calvino, Bénabou, Hébert* (Anma Libri, 1993).

[207] Stanley Eugene Fish, *Is there a text in this class?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982). 318.

that the reader interacts *a posteriori* with the literary text, being driven forward through the text by his or her own independent decipherment and analysis.

It is therefore notable that Brooks at one point refers to a quintessentially continental critic like Roland Barthes. Brooks quotes Barthes in the context of "la passion du sens", which Barthes defines as "the active quest of the reader for those shaping ends that, terminating the dynamic process of reading, promise to bestow meaning and significance on the beginning and middle"[208]. It is precisely characteristic of Barthes that despite the complexity in his method, he deliberately limits precisely the recursiveness, which Brooks and Kermode promote. As will emerge from my discussion below, Barthes' reading is progressing surprisingly simplistically from left-to-right: his ambition is altogether a different one.

In order to enlighten my discussion with the recursive method, it becomes almost indispensable to focus on modernism and its relation to beginning and endings. Do the central elements in modernism point more towards endings or do they point towards beginnings, and in general to which degree is a particular period tied to a particular way of conceiving it?

In this interrogation of the schism between opening and ending, and implicitly between Anglo-American and Continental ideology, the concept of *intention* plays, I believe, a pivotal role. By emphasizing its original etymology, intention could be read precisely as a tension between beginning and end. As Smith puts it: "Thinking about beginnings means thinking about what they intend, toward what ending they tend, and also means thinking about the tension that

[208] Roland Barthes: "Introduction à l'analyse structurale des récits", quoted in Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative*: 19.

unites them"[209]. This is precisely the intentional framework in which Kermode and Brooks operate, and a framework which also Edward Said falls into in his book *Beginnings*, which in fact ends up dealing more with intentions than beginnings. In his book Said exclaims: "The continuity of the work is ensured by the conceptual act of beginning"[210]. Beginnings and endings thereby become inseparable: "Formally, the mind wants to conceive a point in either time or space that marks the beginning of all things (or at least of a limited set of central things), but like Oedipus the mind risks discovering, at that point, where all things will end as well"[211]. In this formal interest there is a profound need for establishing unity; which leads to the idea that a beginning must *imply* the end, in the way that is so central to Aristotle in his *Poetics* (hence another point where Kermode and Aristotle share similarities). It is this unity that is so important, for instance, in medieval works, which show how the beginning entails the end by literally *imitating* the relation between beginning and end. As Smith concludes in his important work on medieval literature: "Some university sermons conclude by restating the opening *thema*, and at least fifteen Middle English poems use their opening lines as their concluding lines"[212].

Modernist writing, on the other hand, reveals that this unity cannot be found in the first place. As I will go on to explore in the next section, modernist texts do not ask for that unity between beginning and end; instead the work proceeds from the beginning in an unforeseeable and unpredictable fashion: "One may as well begin with Helen's letter to her sister", as *Howards*

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[209] Smith, *The Book of the Incipit*: 47.

[210] Said, *Beginnings*: 48.

[211] Ibid., 41.

[212] Smith, *The Book of the Incipit*: 48.

End begins[213]. Lacking a sense of cohesion between beginning and end in order to establish its origin, modernist writing could thus be said to be exposed to a rising pressure on the beginning that becomes increasingly detached and artificial as device. A real beginning would lead so strongly to an end that a beginning appears almost impossible: "If the book could for a first time really begin, it would … long since have ended", as Maurice Blanchot overdramatically expresses it[214]. Blanchot's claim looks like a cliché, but let us turn to modernism for further exploration of the degree to which it addresses the recursive method in particular.

MODERNISM AND ITS URGE FOR SELF-DEFINITION

> "Nada en suma. Absolumente nada"
>
> The Opening of Azorín's *El Escritor* (1942)

Azorín's novel opens by the author's angst of nothingness; the blank page here stands as a metaphysical syndrome, which in its incapacity to open creative avenues instead opens up a different metafictional space. The second sigh – "absolutely nothing" – further radicalizes this nothingness, yet the frustration is also what sets the novel in motion. The dwelling on nothingness, so familiar since at least Mallarmé, becomes a reference amongst a certain generation of authors whose conception of the artwork is nourished by the simultaneous

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[213] E. M. Forster and David A. A. Lodge, *Howards End* (New York: Penguin Books, 2000). See also my discussion of Aragon and Walser. Harry Shaw has pointed out to me that the opening of *Howards End* could also be interpreted not as "open", but on the contrary as an indication that no matter where one starts, the narrator knows that the story will lead to a particular endpoint, and that this route is determined by the narrator. This interpretation would radically change the perception of openness of the novel, but would emphasise another narrative tendency in the modernist period: That the relation between narrator and reader is more disrespectful.

[214] Blanchot quoted by Smith, *The Book of the Incipit*: 113.

excitement and anxiety of building on nothing. This conscious complication of the creative process has in fact been singled out as a central, definitional pillar of modernism. Stephen Heath, for instance, points out that although premodernist writers like Balzac also experienced a "problem of writing", "the writing *itself* [did] not in any way represent a problem"[215]. The awareness of nothingness interferes with the possibility of commencing the text since, in the absence of metaphysical authority, the text simultaneously loses its own claim to authority.

Modernism may consist in the realization that something else *must* precede the beginning, but also in the inability to see what could possibly precede the beginning. It consequently drifts towards the struggle with, and fascination for, the *ex nihilo*. There is a nothing before the beginning; and a fixation on the writing that follows that nothingness, as epitomized by Azorín's *El Escritor*. Mallarmé's *néant* is one of the most famous examples of this tendency. The *néant* is naturally a threat to Mallarmé and implicates that any beginning is better than no beginning; that the *act* of beginning becomes more important than the actual constituents of that beginning. One could say that the panic of nothingness can be overcome by opening up for the fiend of chance (cf. "Un coup de dés n'abolira jamais le hasard"). But this is also a liberation, albeit a problematic one: the "modern condition", in short.

The self-questioning mode of beginning is therefore characteristically 'modern': when authoritative beginnings cease, literature becomes 'modern'. Various scholars confirm this fundamental change in the level of authority from the 19th century to the 20th century. Narratologists like Gérard Genette point to a shift throughout the 19th century from external to

[215] Stephen Heath, "The Practice of Writing," in *The Nouveau Roman: A study in the Practice of Writing* (Philadelphia: Elek, 1972), 15-42.

internal focalization, which lowers the level of authority[216]. In the previous chapter we saw that linguists like Georg Bossong point to a simultaneous movement from so-called canonical to acanonical openings, that is to say, openings containing existential indicators ("there was a man") lose ground to openings in which the subject is not stipulated, but implicitly presupposed, such as the opening of Joseph Conrad's *Lord Jim*:

> He was an inch, perhaps two, under six feet, powerfully built, and he advanced straight at you with a slight stoop of the shoulders, head forward, and a fixed from-under stare which made you think of a charging bull.
>
> Joseph Conrad: *Lord Jim* (1900)

This internal focalization and the implicitly introduced subject lower the level of authority and make it more implausible for the narrator to perceive the story in its entirety.

If modernism is the period with which we associate the "unreliable narrator" – just think of Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw*, Ford Madox Ford's *The Good Soldier*, and Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* – it is not so much, I claim, because the narrator with modernism *becomes* unreliable, but because an internally focalized narration *always* tends to be unreliable. In this more widely used mode of narration, a perfectly reliable narrator will appear suspiciously unrealistic – and an "unreliable" narrator will paradoxically appear more trustworthy. I claim therefore that modernism does not *per se* promote narrative unreliability, but rather tends to adopt a mode of narration that simply cannot escape the "unreliable" in its conception of verisimilitude. When the entire story escapes the narrator, its point of departure becomes more revealing since it clarifies the signals that the

[216] Genette, "Discours du récit," 207-08.. Also quoted in footnote 177.

reader can subsequently look for and challenge[217]. Similarly, Marcel Proust's narrator does not pretend to perceive the entire *Recherche*; on the contrary, the opening of the novel reveals a dynamics between the narrator's two first persons – a dynamics between 'référent' and 'référé' – without which the work could not even have been generated[218]:

> Longtemps je me suis couché de bonne heure
>
> Marcel Proust: *A la recherche du temps perdu* (1913)

This modernist awakening from nothingness is pursued by Marcel Proust, whose never-ending novel opens with the narrator's constitution of a random self after the nothingness of a sleep, the very image that became so powerful to Georges Poulet and the very high-modernist Geneva-school of criticism[219]. Paul Valéry clearly perceives the prospect that lies in the opening: "Au réveil il y a un temps de naissance, une naissance de toutes choses avant que quelqu'une n'ait lieu"[220], and this prospect is what is carried forward in the French critical tradition.

The awareness of nothingness and its lack of external authority, which radicalizes the need to begin, unsurprisingly provoke a stronger sense of individualization of the artistic process and a firmer belief in the autonomy of the artist (a tendency which is not consistent when it comes to the discussion of the avant-garde, which reacts against the autonomy of the work, cf. below p. 155). Indeed this has been pointed out as some of the main characteristics of modernism to such an extent that it has become something of a critical cliché that a modernist work is to be

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[217] Nuttall, *Openings*: 194. See also del Lungo's scheme in del Lungo, *L'Incipit romanesque*: 154-55.

[218] See Doubrovsky, *La Place de la Madeleine: Ecriture et fantasme chez Proust*: 101. Harry Shaw has pointed out to me that Genette seems to think of Marcel as having perceived the entirety of the novel, see Genette, "Discours du récit."

[219] Poulet, *Le point de départ*. For more discussion, see my encyclopedia entry Buch-Jepsen, "Georges Poulet."

[220] Paul Valéry: *Tel quel*: 121, quoted in Poulet, *Le point de départ*: 13.

found in a traditionless space, where influence is claimed to be both undesirable and impossible. Part of the reason for this depiction is that modernist literature tends to interrogate conventions such as the traditional identification of reader and writer. The increasingly provocative mode of writing results from this loosening identification, as Siegfried Jüttner has examined it: "The authors feel free of personal ties to the reader, whom they do not know, and reject the relation to traditional norms"[221]. When the connection between the writer and the reader loosens, the writer will not feel compelled to appeal to their shared sense of literary norms: tradition easily becomes the target, and provocation the artistic means.

This reaction may simply be, as the modernist critic *par excellence* Walter Benjamin cynically claims, the "recurrence of the ever-same in the guise of the ever-new"[222]. Even so, it is important to consider why this particular conception of the break with tradition becomes so pervasive in precisely this period, and precisely a reflection on openings serves to illustrate this quite well. In his seminal text on the opening line as the generative principle of novels, Aragon explains: "j'avais considéré le XIXe siècle comme celui de la rupture avec la tradition"[223]. Aragon points to Gobineau's *Scaramouche* from 1843, which opens by suggesting different clichéd openings in order only to express to the reader an exasperation with the vulgarity of the beginning: "Ma foi, non ! tous ces débuts, étant vulgaires, sont ennuyeux et, puisque je n'ai pas assez d'imagination pour te jeter sur la scène de mon récit d'une manière un peu neuve, j'aime mieux ne pas commencer du tout […]". In this refusal to begin, Aragon locates the new attitude to literary convention:

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[221] Siegfried Jüttner, "Der beschimpfte Leser. Zur Analyse der literarischen Provokation," *Romanische Forschungen* 86(1974): 95. My translation.

[222] Quoted in David Frisby, *Fragments of modernity : theories of modernity in the work of Simmel, Kracauer and Benjamin* (Cambridge: Polity Press in association with Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1985). 36.

[223] Aragon, *Les incipit*: 37.

> Ainsi, le jeune Gobineau […] manifeste l'inquiétude qui s'empare nécessairement de l'écrivain devant le caractère conventionnel que semble nécessairement prendre l'amorce, l'incipit de tout écrit, toute phrase d'initiation à la cérémonie mentale, conte ou roman, qui va constituer le récit entrepris[224].

This beginning frustration with a conventional opening is partly a product of a shift in the function of literature from, what I call, recital to *récit*. In the 19th century, the novel gradually comes to dominate the literary scene, both commercially and creatively, which, as the novelistic opening becomes increasingly institutionalized, threatens the work with banality. To a 20th century observer, the 19th century openings are easily recognizable and classifiable according to the individual author. Aragon thus notices the individualized uniformity of openings: "Je m'étais mis à redécouvrir sous la diversité apparente des incipit du roman romantique une simple uniformité, celle de l'homme, l'auteur. Il y avait les manières de Balzac, celles de Hugo, celles de Flaubert … voilà tout"[225].

This predictable scheme becomes increasingly objectionable as the opening appears to both restrain and challenge the post-realist author's creative possibilities. Openings have thus generally become more 'striking' because they have become more crucial for the 'positioning' of the work as such. Like the preface in the 17th and 18th century defined the work's rhetorical status by explicating its reality mode and its moral intent, much of the modern work's rhetorical and polemic status is to be read through its mode of opening. The rhetorical dynamics of the opening is, however, of an entirely different sort than that of prefaces; openings clearly belong to

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[224] Ibid., 75.

[225] Ibid., 37. Refer also to Barthes' critique of the author-function, which breaks down simultaneously. Barthes, "La mort de l'auteur."

what Genette defines as the 'architext' whereas prefaces belong to the 'paratext'[226]. Simply put, this means that the opening is part of what we normally consider to be "the text". Stripped of most of its paratext, the modernist text thus increasingly needs its opening to position itself more consciously against other texts.

INTERTEXTUALITY AND THE CRITICAL CHALLENGE OF MODERNISM

What I hope to have shown at this point is the existence of an inherent conflict in our common impression of modernism: As mentioned, the modernist vein is perceived to rebut the pre-existent and confess to the absoluteness of creation and the autonomy of the artistic work. Yet, when the text loses its external authority and its sense of originating from a specific tradition, it becomes easier to see its interrelations with a multitude of other cultural manifestations. When specific sources of influence are eliminated, the entire span of connections seems wider, which in turn reduces the potential autonomy of the work. When the originating source is eliminated, every text is, as Stephen Heath puts it:

> …always (an)other text(s) that it remakes, comments, displaces, prolongs, reassumes. A text opens in and from that complex formation of modes of articulation that gives, as it were, the theatre of its activity, a series of settings always already there as its very possibility; as the setting of language is always there, without origin and elsewhere to any individual moment of discourse, always received 'such as it is'[227].

[226] Gerard Genette, *Introduction à l'architexte*, Poétique (Paris: Seuil, 1979).

[227] Heath, "The Practice of Writing," 24.

The loss of origin is in a sense supplanted by a sense of belonging to a larger literary community; the synchronic replacing the diachronic (as is the case also for Ferdinand de Saussure and the linguistic theories that support the literary critic). This phenomenon has later been coined "intertextuality" and has become one of the central concepts associated with modernism. Julia Kristeva thus affirms that "beginning with this break – not only literary but also social, political, and philosophical in nature – the problem of intertextuality (intertextual dialogue) appears as such"[228]. What critics previously saw as 'influence' now seems fundamentally different, as Yves Hervouet explains:

> The idea that the literature of the past may provide aesthetic models or be exploited for didactic or moral purposes is not new. But, since the end of the nineteenth century, intertextuality has become more conscious and systematic, with the modern literary text overtly proclaiming its relation to a host of other texts[229].

This is the reason for the focus on intertextuality as an almost ideological battleground for openings. An ending may not immediately evoke another ending, but who can write an opening of a text without being impregnated with the echoes from preceding openings? Even "Once upon a time..." will inevitably resonate in any attempt at beginning a text. When we consider the emphasis that literary studies in the 20th Century have put on the concept of "intertextuality", we can only be surprised to discover that no discussion of the concept has focused on the most intertextual place in a novel, the opening. As we have seen here and in earlier chapters, the opening can hardly escape other texts and will have to either imitate or deliberately circumvent

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[228] Julia Kristeva: Desire in Language, quoted in Graham Allen, *Intertextuality*, The new critical idiom (London ; New York: Routledge, 2000). 50.

[229] Yves Hervouet, *The French Face of Joseph Conrad* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990). 231.

the existing conventions. Much of the remainder of this chapter will therefore deal with the critical stance of intertextuality in relation to openings.

By being a self-conscious, textual production, modernism has been said in the structuralist nomenclature to "unleash the force of the semiotic" which opens for the intertextual connectivity by exploiting what Kristeva calls the "transpositional" element[230]. The writings of, for instance, Joseph Conrad thus require what Yves Hervouet calls a "relational" reading or what Philippe Lejeune calls a "palimpsestic" reading whereby two or more texts are read in parallel[231]. This mode of reading relates directly to a particular readerly pleasure, which we find in central critical works like Genette's *Palimpsestes* or Barthes' *Le Plaisir du texte*: "If one really enjoys texts, one must surely wish, now and again, to enjoy (at least) two at the same time"[232]. The modernist text is in other words characterized as a palimpsestic text. Even direct quotation at the beginning of a poem has become even commonplace since T.S. Eliot, whereas previously, for instance in the romantic period, such quotation and epigraphs would have interfered with the cult of originality[233].

The palimpsestic text constantly explores and exposes the borderland between itself and the other text, or as Mikhail Bakhtin, one of the forerunners to the intertextual theorists, exclaims: "language lies on the borderline between oneself and the other". Language is never

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[230] Allen, *Intertextuality*: 54.

[231] Hervouet, *The French Face of Joseph Conrad*; Philippe Lejeune, "Par où commencer ?," in *Moi aussi* (Paris: Seuil, 1986).

[232] Hervouet, *The French Face of Joseph Conrad*: 232.

[233] This observation is due to Fiona J. Stafford, *Starting lines in Scottish, Irish and English poetry: from Burns to Heaney* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

entirely its own: "The word in language is half someone else's" [234]. As I have discussed elsewhere[235], modernism has an inherent fascination with otherness, and this facet, although ideological in nature, can be approached through the otherwise seemingly formalistic concept of intertextuality. It could be claimed, for instance, that ideological dominance will attempt to stabilize the relationship between *signified* and *signifier*, that is to say, the relational structure will serve only to propagate the circumscribed "otherness"[236]. Theorists who use the concept of intertextuality rather than Bloom's "anxiety of influence" or Bate's "burden of the past", will be able to spell out this ideological authority in more detail[237]. Edward Said's aforementioned *Beginnings,* which on the face of it appears to be rather abstract and aloof and generally detached from Said's later ideological preoccupations, turns out to develop precisely these dynamics rather implicitly. For one thing, Said's idea of quotation suggests, as Stafford points out, "a force more spatial than temporal in its progress"[238]. To Said, even a passing allusion serves as "a reminder that other writing serves to displace present writing, to a greater or lesser extent, from its absolute, central, proper place"[239]. This is, as Stafford fittingly puts it, "the language of conquest rather than inheritance", and, to Said, quotation thus belongs not predominantly to the realm of literary genealogy, but assumes instead the role of a dominant, or even 'colonizing', power through its capacity to "displace" and "encroach"[240].

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[234] Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, trans. C. Emerson and M. Holquist (Austin TX: University of Texas Press, 2000). 293.

[235] Buch-Jepsen, "What Happened to the Author? Modernist Impersonality and Authorial Selfhood."

[236] See Allen, *Intertextuality*: 33.

[237] Harold Bloom, *The anxiety of influence; a theory of poetry* (New York,: Oxford University Press, 1973); W. Jackson Bate, *The Burden of the Past and the English Poet* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1970).

[238] Said, *Beginnings*: 22; Stafford, *Starting lines*: 39.

[239] Said, *Beginnings*: 22.

[240] Stafford, *Starting lines*: 39; Hayden White, "Criticism as Cultural Politics," *Diacritics* 6, no. 3 (1976).

The emphasis on intertextuality challenges, if not replaces, one of most central concepts in traditional comparative literature, namely that of influence. In the 19th century, this concept used the etymological image of "flow" (*fluere*) to represent an unhindered passage of certain key components from one work to another[241]. Comparative literature, in its continuous focus on literary influences across international frontiers, quickly brought it into contact with an obsession with biological concepts like origins, genesis, and growth, all while positing the organic wholeness of each national culture. The discipline of comparative literature has thus always essentially been a negotiation between, on the one hand, the desire for system and, on the other hand, an international posture – and the notion of influence provided precisely the tool for undertaking this constant negotiation[242].

In the preface to his famous *Manuel de l'histoire de la littérature française* from 1898[243], the critic Ferdinard Brunetière further sharpened the concept of influence by proclaiming that of all the influences that operate in the history of literature, the influence of *works on works* is the principal one[244]. Beginning with Russian formalism, though, concrete influence from one author to another began to be seen as a direct *obstacle* to the reader's interaction with the text. Jurij Tynjanov, one of the Russian theorists most directly involved in the 20th century reformulation of influence, explains this concern in his famous essay "On Literary Evolution":

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[241] For the history of comparative literature see Claudio Guillén, *Literature as System: Essays Towards the Theory of Literary History* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1970).

[242] This observation is due to Guillén, ibid.

[243] Brunetière quoted in René Wellek, *Concepts of Criticism* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1963). 44.

[244] For a humanist, genealogical conception of influence from author to author, as if in a family, see for instance André Gide, *Conseils au jeune écrivain - De l'influence en littérature* (Paris: Proverbe, 1993).

> "Influence" can occur at such a time and in such a direction as literary conditions permit. In the case of functional coincidence, whatever influences him provides the artist with elements which permit the development and strengthening of the function. If there is no such "influence", then an analogous function may result in analogous formal elements without any influence[245].

Tynjanov's exposition is important in its insistence on the fact that literary criticism should not build on vague hypotheses when placing coherences in a historical perspective. His focus on the text's 'function' leads him categorically to reject all previous attempts to understand literary evolution: "The evolutionary relationship of function and formal elements is a completely uninvestigated problem"[246]. "Influence" can, he claims, only be affirmed when identical functions bring about identical or analogous formal elements (what he calls an "auto-function")[247]. A study of literary openings, I do not hesitate to add, would for instance satisfy Tynjanov's methodological requirement.

The concept of intertextuality, although only coined by Kristeva in the 1960's, is a direct development from Tynjanov's theory and tries to set up a *positive technique* for the critic to work with other texts. Intertextuality does not evoke an "anxiety" or a "burden" as in the 20th century

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[245] Tynjanov, "On Literary Evolution," 76.

[246] Ibid., 71.

[247] Ibid., 68.. In this passage it is clarified that: "The interrelationship of each element with every other in a literary work and with the whole literary system as well may be called the constructional function of the given element. On close examination, such a function proves to be a complex concept. An element is on the one hand interrelated with similar elements in other works in other systems, and on the other hand it is interrelated with different elements within the same work. The former may be termed the auto-function and the latter, the syn-function." This means that the auto-function conditions the syn-function. The structural function changes the author's intention into a catalyst. This is not creative freedom, but creative necessity. Direct influence will be replaced by considerations of evolution viewed as modification of literary works, that is, deformation.This is in line with Jakobson as well as Tynjanov: "The evolution of literature cannot be understood until the evolutionary problem ceases to be observed by questions of episodic, nonsystemic origin, whether literary (for exemple, so-called "literary influences") or extraliterary" ibid., 79.

Anglo-American theories based on the writer's perspective: the perspective of intertextuality is invariably that of the reader, not the writer. Although scholars unsurprisingly disagree on the exact meaning and applicability of the term "intertextuality", Michael Riffaterre's broad definition: "L'intertexte est la perception, par la lecture, de rapports entre une œuvre et d'autres qui l'ont précédé ou suivie" may come closest to a consensus[248]. Yet, more important seems the shared assumption that intertextuality challenges any consideration of *origin.* At this point even Tynjanov's dismissal of genesis as an external phenomenon is not radical enough, as Tzvetan Todorov, an important disciple of Barthes and specialist in Russian formalism, avows: "as far back as we trace genesis, we find only other texts, other products of language; and it is difficult for us to conceive their apportionment"[249].

Intertextuality's interest in textual relations does under no circumstances amount to source hunting. The relations between texts are not concrete – one text cannot be antecedent in relation to another; texts are instead seen to occupy an abstract space in which they interact synchronically, or as Jonathan Culler shrewdly puts it: "Intertextuality is less a name for a work's relation to particular prior texts than an assertion of a work's participation in a discursive space and its relation to the codes which are the potential formalizations of that space"[250]. Yet, the real complication is how this works in practice. Intertextual relations are per definition boundless and, as Culler calls attention to, any concrete attempt to work with them will inevitably narrow them down, thereby threatening them to collapse back into precisely the kind

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[248] Michael Riffaterre, *La Production du texte* (Paris: Seuil, 1979). 8.

[249] Tzvetan Todorov, *Introduction to Poetics* (Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1981). 60.

[250] Jonathan Culler, "Presupposition and Intertextuality," *Modern Language Notes* 91(1976). Reprinted in Jonathan Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs - Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1981). 241. Barthes expresses the same idea quite differently "l'intertexte : l'impossibilité de vivre hors du texte infini". Roland Barthes, *Le plaisir du texte*, Collection Tel quel (Paris,: Éditions du Seuil, 1973). 59.

of source study that these literary theorists tried to circumvent. Or put differently, the dilemma of intertextuality is the following: Either intertextuality remains abstract and limitless – but then the concept is more or less useless from a critical and formalistic point of view[251]. Or intertextuality must be narrowed down to more concrete relations, but then the concept threatens to collapse into the otherwise rejected concept of influence.

Culler thus points out the fundamental instability of the concept of intertextuality and the insufficiency of the use to which Barthes puts this concept, for instance in his analysis of Balzac. Sean Burke has even drawn the conclusion that intertextuality cannot break the spell of the traditional, critical practice: "Intertextuality […], as it has been formulated and put into practice, returns quite compliantly to notions of influence and revision"[252]. Yet, the impulse behind intertextuality is a stout resistance to the idea of origin and a preexisting textual authority: the reader is not bound; the text is boundless; and to read is to *open* the text.

Culler has therefore tried to reformulate the intertextual impulse in the face of its impractical and unstable nature by associating it with a *competence* on a par with linguistic mastery: "what makes possible reading and writing is not a single anterior action which serves as origin and moment of plenitude but an open series of acts, both identifiable and lost, which work together to constitute something like a language, discursive possibilities, systems of convention"[253]. Culler therefore constructively suggests working with *presupposition* as a model for intertextuality, since presupposition undermines referentiality, but yet limits the set of

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[251] My view is here in line with Clayton's: "[Barthes'] radical intertextuality forgoes the possibility of rigor in the discussion of individual texts". Jay Clayton and Eric Rothstein, "Figures in the Corpus: Theories of Influence and Intertextuality," in *Influence and Intertextuality in Literary History*, ed. Jay Clayton and Eric Rothstein (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), 23.

[252] Sean Burke, *The Death and Return of the Author - Criticism and Subjectivity in Barthes, Foucault and Derrida* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1992). 173.

[253] Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs - Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction*: 110.

intertexts for an interpretation to those that are either logically or pragmatically suggested by the text one is studying. Culler's proposal adds methodology and assurance to the critical act, without introducing the rebuked dependence on "moments of authority and points of origin"[254]. Characteristically of Culler's work, this way of perceiving intertextuality emphasizes the reader's awareness of *conventions* as central to literary criticism.

Despite the evident usefulness of Culler's proposal, especially as he points out that logical presuppositions are important in opening sentences in novels, I believe that Barthes would remain interested merely in intertextuality as a system of combination and as a logic of composition that would simply ignore the inherent instability of the concept. As indicated earlier in this chapter, Barthes is interested in the space of the opening itself, without concern for the shape that the text develops into – and as indicated above this is an ideological stand. Barthes would therefore not be interested in more thorough redefinitions of intertextuality that emerged from American criticism. Moreover, it is unclear to what degree even such an intertextual system can rely on communal conventions and not simply fall back on individual critics' selections and their individual, intellectual competence[255].

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[254] Ibid., 117.

[255] Bloom refers to Barthes' approach as being inspired by the Kabbalah, which would further explain why someone with Barthes' outlook would not try to go beyond the initial state, see also the first chapter's discussion of Jacob Böhme. Bloom, *Kabbalah and Criticism*: 37.: "One might indeed call Cordovero the first Structuralist, an unacknowledged ancestor of many contemporary French theorists of the "human sciences". Bloom goes on to say: "Gnosis and Kabbalah, as I think we can now begin to see, were the first Modernisms, in our still current sense "Modernism". A modern poem begins with a clinamen that depends upon the renunciation of an earlier poem. But this renunciation must be dialectical. The earlier poem (or poet) is concentrated (which means also contracted) and made to vacate part of himself. Since the precursor has been internalized, a crucial mental space in the ephebe is being voided. Creation begins therefore with an element in the self contracting to a primordial point. But this concentration sets up defensive reactions in the self, making the subsequent creation a catastrophe, and rendering tikkun or representation a hopeless quest, since there can come no reparation for an overly-defended self, and least of all from that self." Ibid., 79-80.

BARTHES' BEGINNINGS: *PAR OÙ COMMENCER ?*

For Barthes, who was also extremely instrumental in shaping the concept of intertextuality, textual utterances can under no circumstances bear out moments of origin. With his typical intermingling of subjectivity theory and literary theory, Barthes exclaims that: "je n'est pas un sujet innocent, antérieur au texte... Ce 'moi' qui s'approche du texte est déjà lui-même une pluralité d'autres textes, de codes infinis, ou plus exactement: perdus (dont l'origine se perd)"[256]. In his famous proclamation of the "death" of the author, I believe it is important to look behind the avant-gardist provocation, which it is often hailed as, and notice that Barthes does not in fact wholly disavow the *author*, but instead the *authority* that we traditionally attach to that concept. The author should no longer be perceived as the *origin* of the writings, and no longer provide a privileged access into them; the author does not exert authority over his or her own fictions. The author may thus, as Barthes himself puts it, "come back" in the text, but only as a "guest"[257]. In his methodology, Barthes also accepts the notion of "oeuvre", for instance, when undertaking parallel readings of an author's different texts, which is a technique that relies precisely on the notion of authorship[258]. The notion of *origin* is the real offender; the notion of author only offends insofar as it is perceived as an origin.

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[256] Roland Barthes, *S/Z* (Paris: Seuil, 1970). 15-16.

[257] Roland Barthes, "From Work to Text," in *The rustle of language* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1986), 61.. Compare with Derrida's comment on Rousseau in *Of Grammatology*: "his declared intention is not annulled […] but rather inscribed within a system which it no longer dominates". Jacques Derrida, *Of grammatology*, 1st American ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976). 243.

[258] Cf. Raymond Picard's famous critique of Barthes. I believe also that Graham Allen is perfectly right in his observation: "yet at the very moment that Barthes makes that move he is citing Mallarmé as an authorial point not of origin but at least of conscious determination". Allen, *Intertextuality*: 74.. See Barthes' text "Longtemps, je me suis couché de bonne heure" in Barthes, *Œuvres complètes*: V, 459-70. Here Barthes claims that the opening sentence "ouvre un épisode d'une cinquantaine de pages qui, tel le mandala tibétain, tient rassemblée dans sa vue toute l'œuvre proustienne" (461). In this text Barthes also mentions Dantes "nel mezzo del camin di nostra vita".

To Barthes, writing is thus a synchronous activity, cut off from considerations of causality, and "the writer can only imitate a gesture that is always anterior, never original"[259]. Yet, the dismissal of origin is in reality a relocation of the textual unity: "a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination"[260]. Edward Said's spatial sense of quotation is also found in Barthes' validation of the reader: "The reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost"[261].

In this readerly accumulation of quotation lies the key to structuralism's underlying intention. In the article "Par où commencer ?" that inaugurated the prominent theoretical journal *Poétique*, Barthes portrays structuralism as "une science du pluriel"[262]. This characterization is deliberately meant to defy the French scholastic method of "explication de texte", which attempts to explicate a whole text by analysing each and every stylistic element occurring in a short textual extract. This institutionalized method seals off the text, whereas, to Barthes, criticism is a question of setting foot in "le pluriel du texte, dans le jeu du signifiant, dans

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[259] "A text is […] a multidimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash". Barthes, "La mort de l'auteur." This leads Seymour Chatman to exclaim: "Structuralist poetics takes narrative as a synchronous phenomenon and so is not concerned with its genesis or composition, but only its completed shape." Chatman, "Towards a Theory of Narrative." This characterization is of course ironic when the reader's interest lies in the "scriptible". Chatman's comment does not seem wholly correct: the concept of genesis is questioned, but an interest in composition does not necessarily stand on the side of genesis. For other structuralist validations of openings, see Genette on beginnings in Proust, Genette, "Discours du récit," 85-89. See also Zoltán Kanyó, "Anmerkungen zur Frage des Textanfangs der literarischen Geschichte," in *Texttheorie und Interpretation. Untersuchungen zu Gryphius, Borchert und Böll*, ed. Arpád Bernáth, Csuri Karoly, and Zoltán Kanyó (Kronberg/Ts: Scriptor Verlag, 1975). Kanyó is very structurally founded and treats text as a linguistic system with formulae for different openings. A model for beginnings can be found in Algirdas Julien Greimas, *Sémantique structurale, recherche de méthode*, Langue et langage (Paris,: Larousse, 1966).

[260] Barthes, "La mort de l'auteur."

[261] Said, *Beginnings*: 315. Structuralists are like the 'essentialists' also guilty of the myth of the origin. Said does not mythify writing like Barthes.

[262] Roland Barthes, "Par où commencer ?," *Poétique* 1(1970): 3-9.

l'écriture"[263]. In this manifesto-like text, the ambivalence, always present in Barthes' thinking, between *science* and *pleasure* stands out particularly well. The "scientific" is set to sustain the playful, and the critical analysis even seems to begin at an arbitrary point: "L'analyse commence par une vue sémantique, soit thématique, soit symbolique, soit idéologique". The beginning is open – and is supposed to be open. Only when one has begun, science can push forward, and still only in the interest of semantic plurality: "À partir d'une condensation on doit faire partir les premiers contenus sous l'action d'une science formelle qui cherche le pluriel"[264]. Thus, even in the early, "structuralist" Barthes, we sense a limit to the "scientific" impulse, which becomes dominant in his later texts. In Barthes' analysis of an extract from *Genesis*, for example, considerations of both diachronic origin *and* synchronic structure are undermined in favor of the text's disruptive potential, as textual analysis is now taken as no longer saying "*from where* the text comes (historical criticism), nor even *how* it is made (structural analysis), but how it is unmade, how it explodes, disseminates – by what coded paths it goes off"[265].

Not only does the approach to the text quickly become ideological, certain texts will lend themselves better to that particular readerly approach. What is now called modernist texts allow the reader to become part of the production of meaning[266], whereas "the classical text […] closes the work, chains it to the letter, rivets it to its signified"[267]. The beginning of the work thus plays an instrumental role in opening the work; in the article on the point of departure of textual

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[263] Ibid., 3.

[264] Ibid. It is, however, not clear how a condensation works with plurality.

[265] Roland Barthes, "The Struggle with the Angel: Textual Analysis of Genesis 32: 22-32," in *Image - Music - Text* (1971).

[266] Cf. Graham Allen comment's on Barthes. Allen, *Intertextuality*: 68.

[267] Roland Barthes, "The theory of the text," in *Untying the text : a post-structuralist reader*, ed. Robert Young (Boston: Routledge and K. Paul, 1981), 33.

analysis, "Par où commencer ?", Barthes rebukes the openings of Balzac's novels because they open "comme un 'tableau', un discours statique et synchronique"[268]. Yet, in this methodological article, Barthes reflects on the "first act to perform in the presence of the text" and argues that the reader should begin by setting up precisely a "tableau" on the basis of the information collected in the opening of the novel[269].

Barthes exemplifies this piece of advice by reading Jules Verne's *Île mystérieuse* (1875), which he directs away from Verne's otherwise stout fixation on "closure and plenitude" and towards the heroes' early development of tools, which allows their story to begin properly. Being thus a *mise-en-abyme* of the critical process of developing the appropriate tool for the particular (textual) situation, there does not seem to be one overarching method with which to begin the textual interaction. Barthes' recommendation therefore seems disappointing to literary criticism's possible 'scientific' aspirations: as Diana Knight indicates, one simply begins where one wants to begin[270]. In the attempt at decipherment, the critic develops the appropriate tools along the way depending on the point of departure, in a move that Barthes draws up around the word "déchiffrement" (decipherment), which quickly turns into "défrichement" (ground clearing), where the critic employs the improvised tools to clear the ground for his or her impromptu reading.

Barthes' prescription at this point is not so much how to carry out a textual analysis as how to position it from the outset. Barthes does not seem to move beyond the beginning and focuses instead merely on what Knight calls a "pre-criticism", while the full structural analysis

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[268] Barthes, "Par où commencer ?."

[269] See Knight's illuminating discussion of this article by Barthes. Diana Knight, "Where to Begin?," *Yale Journal of Criticism: Interpretation in the Humanities* 14, no. 2 (2001): 494.

[270] Ibid., 495.

"recedes into the future"[271]. Knight reads this move as an indication that Barthes is more thematic than formalist in his readings, but this would be to underestimate Barthes' stylistic sensibility. Barthes begins in style and begins with style: "le style est en quelque sorte le commencement de l'écriture: même timidement, en s'offrant à de grands risques de récupération, il amorce le règne du signifiant"[272]. 'Amorcer' is here a particularly well chosen term (a term which I discussed in the beginning of my second chapter): The text puts on "bait" ("amorce") in the form of rich signifiers, which then lure in the reader. This move, however, will inescapably mark a beginning ("amorcer" in the figurative meaning: "to begin"). Text should shun "recuperation" by analysis and instead *open* the doors to the realm of the signifier. To Barthes, textual pleasure is first and foremost to be found in the sovereignty of a text that opens up the reading process and in this way continuously seeks beginnings. There is a particular pleasure in beginnings that Barthes recognizes even in his own writing:

> Aimant à trouver, à écrire des *débuts*, il [i.e. Barthes himself] tend à multiplier ce plaisir : voilà pourquoi il écrit des fragments : autant de fragments, autant de débuts, autant de plaisirs (mais il n'aime pas les fins : le risque de clausule rhétorique est trop grand : crainte de ne savoir résister au *dernier mot*, à la dernière réplique[273].

Barthes' remark suggests that this multiplication of the pleasure of beginning is not altogether innocent. *The bliss of beginning is an ideological question.*

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[271] Ibid. Knight interestingly uses this observation to argue that the article "Par où commencer ?" may mark Barthes' transition from structural to textual analysis.

[272] "Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes", in Barthes, *Œuvres complètes*: IV, 653.

[273] "Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes", in ibid., 671. See also Roland Barthes, *Le Grain de la voix* (Paris: Seuil, 1981). 174. and Barthes, *Le plaisir du texte*: ad passim.

The structuralist concept of "text" is often portrayed as having no real boundaries: In principle it is endless and consequently has neither definite beginnings nor endings. Yet, both in Barthes and in associated theorists it appears that the concept of "text" rejects only endings while in fact staying loyal to beginnings. One of the theorists who shaped structuralism into being an ideological tool, Claude Duchet, articulates this explicitly in an article on openings in the first issue of the new *Littérature*: "Le mot texte n'implique pour nous aucune clôture"[274]. Text is not tied down by an ending, but instead shifts continuously according to the particular study's point of departure: "Il s'agit d'un objet d'étude, dont la nature change selon le point de vue d'où il est abordé"[275]. A text is hence perceived as the potential of its readings, which instigate its very existence: "[L]e bout d'un texte n'est pas sa fin, mais l'attente de sa lecture, le début de son pourquoi, de son vers quoi"[276]. To Duchet as well as to Barthes, the critic's point of departure is *poetics*, that is, the creation of meaning, which begins by the text's effect on the reader. Theorists like Barthes and Duchet who favor poetics to hermeneutics seem to have a keener interest in openings and the general theme of beginning. Openings make it is easier for them to demonstrate the dynamic generation of meaning, all the while steering clear of the hermeneutic search for preexistent meaning hidden in the text.

LE REFUS DU COMMENCEMENT: MODERNIST CRITICS MAKE LITERATURE MODERNIST

Despite the apparent formalism of intertextuality, the concept inevitably gets entangled in a tremendously ideological debate about literature and the role of literary criticism. Although this

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[274] Claude Duchet, "Pour un sociocritique, ou variation sur un incipit," *Littérature* 1(1971): 6.

[275] Ibid.

[276] Ibid., 7-8.

debate may seem far from the discussion of literary openings, it seems unavoidable to discuss intertextuality at some length, as I have done, as one's approach to openings and one's approach to intertextuality in many ways are logically interdependent. Due to the particular nature of the opening, which constantly threatens to fall into the recognizable cliché, the opening both illustrates and challenges the concept of intertextuality as well as challenges both the author and the critic.

The question that I started out addressing more specifically was whether the opening during the modernist period differs fundamentally from its predecessors. As I have already partly indicated, I believe that this question is inseparable from the question of the literary critic's methodology. Regardless of the formal characteristics of a literary text, the critic will approach it in a particular way that influences the way that these formal characteristics are perceived. Structuralist critics such as Barthes and Kristeva are no exception, and consequently they are prone to the following difficulty: on the one hand they claim that there is something particular about modernist openings. On the other hand, they analyze older openings in such a way that make them appear modernist, thereby undermining their first claim. The modernist critics have strengthened the conviction that one cannot and should not investigate into the origin of the text; yet the arguments regarding the abruptness of the modernist text are themselves modernist[277].

For instance, Kristeva is very explicit in *Le texte close* about the "coupure épistémologique du XIXe-XXe siècle", which liberated the text from a frozen approach that

[277] It should be added, as I have explored elsewhere, that the term "modernism" is not used in French literary history, which talks merely of modern and modernity, Buch-Jepsen, "What Happened to the Author? Modernist Impersonality and Authorial Selfhood." Refer to this article for more discussion of how this affects the debate. In this dissertation, I will simply presuppose that the distinction is as valid in French as it is in English and most other European languages

perceives the literary work as "terminée dans son début, fermée"[278]. Yet, as John Frow has also pointed out[279], the otherwise extremely formalistic Kristeva fails to explain in formalistic terms precisely how the modern novels differ from earlier novels – Kristeva merely reverts to what I have earlier called the "clichés of modernism" – generalizations about a fundamental rupture. So we must ask: has the modernist novel really changed – or is it merely the critic's eyes that have changed?

The reason why structuralism runs into this difficulty is also that the structuralist critic is to become a sort of writer in his or her own right: "Il reste donc au structuralisme à se transformer en 'écrivain' "[280]. The critic is thereby set on a par with the modernist writer. This tendency is especially conspicuous when Barthes manages to analyze Edgar Allen Poe or Balzac with a perfect, modern, intertextual approach: how could it be argued that the intertextuality in the form that we recognize emerges in literary works only with the rise of modernism[281], as Kristeva suggests, when a perfectly intertextual analysis of earlier works can be successfully conducted? This implies either that intertextuality is not after all a defining property of modernist works – or that Kristeva's and Barthes' criticism itself becomes modernist, thereby transforming all literary works through the lens of structuralism/modernism (I here equate structuralism and modernism, as I see structuralism as modernism moving into the circle of criticism). The latter would be entirely in the spirit of Barthes according to whom the linearity of the concept of influence is replaced by the dynamic concept of circulation: "je ne crois pas aux influences (…)

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[278] Julia Kristeva, "Le Texte clos," in *Semeiotike: recherches pour une sémanalyse* (Paris: Seuil, 1978 [1969]), 58.

[279] John Frow quoted in Clayton and Rothstein, "Figures in the Corpus: Theories of Influence and Intertextuality," 20.

[280] Roland Barthes: "De la science à la literature", in Barthes, *Œuvres complètes*: II, 1267.

[281] Cf. Allen, *Intertextuality*: 81.

C'est pourquoi la notion de *circulation* me paraît plus juste que celle d'*influence* ; les livres sont plutôt des 'monnaies' que des 'forces' "[282]. So the question what is so special about modernism still remains to be answered.

Yet, Barthes operates with the same historical divide as Kristeva: Modern literature has an altogether different ambition. Barthes here also reverts to some of the common (Mallarméan and Bergsonian) clichés about modernism: "La modernité commence avec la recherche d'une Littérature impossible" and "L'art moderne essaie de détruire la durée"[283]. Barthes, despite his inconsistencies, is however profoundly interested in pinning these differences down formalistically and in *S/Z* he introduced the much acclaimed distinction between texts that are "scriptible" (focused on the author) and texts that are "lisible" (focused on the reader), a distinction which reminds us of the narratologists' distinction between narrative perspectives[284]. Yet, even this formalistic distinction quickly drifts into the normative, or even the ideological: the "scriptible" is thus positively associated with "l'ouverture des réseaux" whereas the texts that are "lisibles" are negatively "engagés dans le système de clôture de l'Occident"[285].

What is clear from my discussion of Kristeva and Barthes is that the seemingly profoundly formalistic concept of intertextuality cannot avoid being deeply entangled with ideology. Intertextuality is used ideologically, just as the glorification of certain novelistic openings is used ideologically. Intertextuality is a "revolutionary" technique, both formalistically

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[282] Barthes, *Œuvres complètes*: II, 616.

[283] "Le Degré zéro de l'écriture", in ibid., I, 194.

[284] See the previous chapter 2.

[285] "S/Z", in Barthes, *Œuvres complètes*: III, 122-24.

and ideologically, and engrained into the avant-gardism with which modernism is associated[286]. The modernist critic thus also becomes an avant-gardist who participates, through the disruptive technique of intertextuality, in the demolition of the existing rules[287]. Following Peter Bürger's widely accepted definition of the avant-garde as primarily being an attack on the institution of art in bourgeois society based on the idea of the artwork's autonomy[288], it becomes quite clear that intertextuality can be used precisely to reject this autonomy. Through such a critical lens, it is not surprising that Barthes sees modern literature to be following "pas à pas le déchirement de la conscience bourgeoise"[289].

The French avant-garde critic thereby develops a special relation to intertextuality as well as to openings as the latter represent the future potential of a limitless artistic space. The critic thus becomes prone to what Foucault has analyzed as "Le refus du commencement", as a particular modern, critical mode[290].

SAID'S *BEGINNINGS*: THE ELUSIVE OPENING

It is in this discussion that Edward Said's monumental work *Beginnings* (1975) fits in. Drawing primarily on Giambattista Vico, Said differentiates between *origins,* which are divine and

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[286] Lukács equated the avant-garde with modernism in György Lukács, *The meaning of contemporary realism* (London: Merlin Press, 1963).

[287] For instance the early Edward Said of *Beginnings* explicitly defines himself as an avant-garde critic. Edward W. Said, "Interview," *Diacritics* 6, no. 3 (1976).

[288] Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984). 86.

[289] "Le Degré zero de l'écriture", in Barthes, *Œuvres complètes*: I, 173.

[290] "L'inachevé de l'interprétation, le fait qu'elle soit toujours déchiquetée, et qu'elle reste en suspens au bord d'elle-même, se retrouve, je crois, d'une façon assez analogue chez Marx, Nietzsche et Freud, sous la forme du refus du commencement". Michel Foucault, "Nietzshe, Freud, Marx," in *Nietzsche, Cahiers de Royaumont* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1967), 188.

mythical, and *beginnings*, which are worldly and humanly produced. Unsurprisingly, Said favors beginnings over origins. Origins have what he calls a "dynastic" structure, which aims to dominate and determine what derives from it. Beginnings, on the contrary, have what we can call a "dynamic" structure, which implies complementarity and adjacency between the beginning and the result[291]. In other words, origins are perceived as passive, beginnings as active.

This distinction is important for our conception of the modernist writer and, in turn, for our conception of the modernist or "avant-garde" critic – of which Said himself is a prime example. When, as Foucault argues, the idea of order dissipates by the end of the 19th century, the modern writer is left without a clear sense of origins and, for that matter, ends[292]. This loss of origins later turned into a theoretical *critique* of origins; Ferdinand de Saussure's idea of favoring synchrony over diachrony gains ground, and, with structuralism and poststructuralism, anti-foundational thinking flourished: the authoritarian – or "dynastic" – concept of *influence* was substituted by the relational concept of *intertextuality*; and the dynastic concept of *author* was buried underneath a relational network of *text*.

Although drawing heavily on the structuralist impulse in France, Said insinuates that the structuralists, in their systematic repression of origins, are just as prone to the myth of the origin[293]. Unlike Barthes, Said does not wish to mythify writing, and by differentiating beginnings from origins, Said finds a place to reinstate authorial will and authorial intentions without having to embrace the eschewed concept of origins. This twist does, however, not revert to a traditional intentionalist criticism, but it simply helps Said insist on a relation between the

[291] Said, *Beginnings*: xii, 373.

[292] White, "Criticism as Cultural Politics," 10.

[293] Said, *Beginnings*: 315.

existence of the author and his or her textual product: "The net result is to understand language as an intentional structure signifying a series of displacements"[294].

This move is important for Said's later more explicitly ideological work, and although *Beginnings* is now probably more cited than read, it marked – very appropriately – the beginning of Said's own academic and critical career. *Beginnings* was a beginning for Said, not simply because it established his reputation, but because it cleared the ground for his later works and furthermore justified the appearance on American soil of what he himself calls an "avant-garde" or "French-influenced" critic[295]. Said's reflection on the simultaneous difficulty and potential of beginning is in itself a metareflection on the modern critic's challenges in the absence of an origin in traditional literary criticism:

> So the critics face irregularity on all sides. Because he cannot have recourse to tradition in solving the problems of writers like Joyce, and because his (and Joyce's) references are to other makeshift formalities of knowledge, the critic is aptly characterized in Lukacs' epithet for the novel as being transcendentally homeless. He begins each work as if it were a new occasion. His beginning, as much as any modern writer's beginning, takes up a subject in order to begin it, keep it going, create it[296].

The dense style and generally non-argumentative structure of *Beginnings* makes Jonathan Culler exclaim: "The expert on beginnings has difficulty getting under way"[297]. Yet, this

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[294] Ibid., 66.

[295] See interview with him: Said, "Interview." "Avant-garde critics are mainly French-influenced critics. One can divide critics into French-influenced and non-French influenced. The avant-garde critic claims intertextuality to be the universal condition of text".

[296] Said, *Beginnings*: 11.

[297] Jonathan Culler, "Beginnings: Intention and Method by Edward W. Said," *Modern Language Review* 73, no. 3 (1978): 583.

characteristic is precisely, as Culler is very well aware of, what sets the avant-garde critic apart from the 'institutionalized' critic[298]. Said consolidates all the problems of the modern, traditionless critic into one fundamental question: "how should [the critic] begin to write?"[299]. The modern critic is hence on a par with the modernist writer:

> One way of mitigating this change [in the critic's conditions for writing] and even of enhancing the fact that it has taken place, is to argue that literature itself has gone through the same change… [When] one begins to write today one is necessarily more of an autodidact, gathering or making up the knowledge one needs in the course of creating. The influence of the past appears less useful and, as two prominent critics W. J. Bate and Harold Bloom, have argued, more likely to produce anxiety. Therefore Roland Barthes, paraphrasing Bachelard, has said that the study – and the production of literature today – is the study and the production of de-formation. To read Joyce we must follow these de-formations, just as Joyce's reading de-formed the traditional curriculum[300].

Literary criticism is hence to match modernist writing in inventiveness and in "the redistribution of textual space". Dismantling the traditionally dynastic relations between authors and between texts, the production of meaning will instead follow a logic of "adjacency": "the [modernist] text itself stands to the side of, next to, or between the bulk of all other works – not in a line with them, nor in a line of descent from them"[301]. Any interest in precedence and in the past appears to be simply "improbable", as in the case of Joyce's *Ulysses'* reference to Homer and T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*'s reference to Dante. The modernist text can consequently be

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[298] Moreover, modern linguistics began precisely with Saussure's difficulty in beginning, see Knight, "YJC," 493.

[299] Said, *Beginnings*: 6.

[300] Ibid., 8.

[301] Ibid., 10.

"neither effectively read as commentary nor described by commentary"[302]. At this point, Said may not realize that the commendable "adjacency" of modern texts very easily equals a form of textual "solipsism", by which texts fail altogether to communicate and interact. On the other hand, this would only add to the creative importance of the critic whose job it is to associate these texts in an imaginative way.

It is on this background of tradition and creation that Said develops his most useful theoretical distinction, that between "authority" and "molestation"[303]. The author is constantly to mediate between his or her own authority and an external pressure, or as Jonathan Culler poignantly puts it:

> The novelist desires to be a beginning, the source of an authoritative fictional world, but he knows that his authority is 'molested' both by the tradition of the novel, which precedes and guides his activity, and by the independent authority of the world to which he seeks to relate. Novels display the tension between the novelist's authoritative assertion of self in creating a continuation of life and the threats to that authority posed by all the independent agents of mediation: language, tradition, verisimilitude[304].

Molestation makes the reader aware that the work is always comparable to reality and with other novels, and therefore can be found to be an illusion, and Said's distinction may

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[302] Ibid.. This is one point where Said, despite his French-inspired approach, seems to differ from the French critics; according to Roland Barthes, a text is always a comment, and the French tend to see the novel as always related to society: even the experimental Philippe Sollers says: "le roman est la manière dont cette société se parle, la manière dont l'individu doit se vivre pour y être accepté. Il est donc essentiel que le point de vue « romanesque » soit omniprésent, évident, intouchable". Philippe Sollers, *Logiques*, Collection Tel quel (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1968). 228.

[303] In the chapter 'The Novel as Beginning Intention' of Said, *Beginnings*.

[304] Culler, "Beginnings: Intention and Method by Edward W. Said," 583-84.

therefore, as Homer Brown has suggested, be more illuminative than the realist vs. non-realist contrast[305].

The distinction furthermore helps us understand *Beginnings*, despite its hermetic appearance, as essentially a political allegory, as for instance Hayden White claims[306]. The dynamics between authority and molestation makes the smallest reference remind us "that other writing serves to displace present writing, to a greater or lesser extent, from its absolute, central, proper place"[307].

This, however, is also the point that sets Said most apart from the structuralist inspiration. Writing testifies to the author's existence by manifesting his or her struggle for authority in the face of the threat of molestation. As Culler has pointed out, Said simply fails to address the complication stemming from the text's establishment of a fictional self, which could undermine the empirical author of any authority[308]. Thus, when Said relies rigidly on the foucauldian distinction between beginnings as active and origins as passive, he runs a risk of simplifying the fundamental problems underlying *both* these concepts. In other words, Said runs the risk of rendering origins "pathologically fictive" and beginnings "restrictively and preclusively performative", as Vance Smith puts it[309]. This makes Said neglect the very formal construction of beginnings, which in turn would explain his peculiar failure concretely to analyze literary

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[305] Homer Obed Brown, "Review of Beginnings: Intention and Method," *MLN* 91, no. 5 (1976). Also see my discussion of the distinction between realism and non-realism from page 83.

[306] White, "Criticism as Cultural Politics," 8.

[307] Ibid., 22.

[308] Culler, "Beginnings: Intention and Method by Edward W. Said.". Yet, one could question whether Culler is entirely right in his objection. Could one not say that the empirical author has the authority over the fictional self? The author has e.g. a right to create as many fictional selves as the work requires, cf. Pessoa. The empirical author needs to create a fictional self – that's part of the fictional game.

[309] Smith, *The Book of the Incipit*: 218. Also, see Said, *Beginnings*: 24.

beginnings. Only in a handful of places throughout this long book, Said actually concretely discusses the beginnings of novels[310].

Due to its reputation, Said's *Beginnings* is difficult simply to ignore, which is the reason why I here occupy myself with intertextuality, influence and origin. Yet the work is in fact not very useful when it comes to the real intent of this dissertation, namely the understanding of the formal dynamics of novelistic beginnings, as I undertake more explicitly in my other chapters.

CONCLUSION: MODERNISM AS A SHIFT IN THE COMMUNICATIVE MODEL

We have seen that the modernist critics seem extremely preoccupied with beginnings and openings. Yet, the strange thing is that, at a closer look, these critics refrain from discussing openings concretely. It therefore becomes extremely difficult to pin down any indication that there is indeed something particular about the modernist opening. Even in the most intelligent attempts, it is difficult to distinguish clichés about modernism from formalistic observations about modernism. Since Hegel talked of the "Moderne Verlegenheit um den Anfang"[311], this modern embarrassment or uneasiness about the beginning has been incredible difficult to pin down. In my previous chapter I tried to show some of the formal characteristics of modernist openings, and in my view this examination must inevitably be statistical-grammatical in order to have credence.

We must therefore be at guard against loose, unsubstantiated claims such as Steiner's: "We have no more beginnings"[312]. This sort of speculation is at best ambiguous, first of all

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[310] Said, *Beginnings*: 43, 46, 50, 84, 89.

[311] Quoted in Steiner, *Grammars of Creation*: 196.

[312] Ibid., 1.

because it does not distinguish between ontology and epistemology: is this a claim about the world – or a claim about how we perceive the world?

The inability of critics to make concrete observations about modernist openings shows in my view that modernism is itself another narrative (in fact a narrative of a beginning without an end: most theorists do not describe the end of the period, only its inception). As I have shown in the case of the structuralist critics, the approach to the opening is very much an ideological question, which threatens to obscure the concrete discussion rather severely.

Yet, at the level of narrative, the modernist designation of origin as the deprivation of beginning often takes the shape of a formal principle. David Lodge claims that "the modernist novel has no real 'beginning', since it plunges us into a flowing stream of experience"[313]. According to this logic, the beginning of the modernist work becomes a question of: "where we decide to join the flow"[314]. The challenge is how to direct this generalization about stream of consciousness in the direction of a concrete, formal observation. One common approach is to involve the temporal experience of literary works. Joseph Frank for example claims that modern works suspend the "process of individual reference temporarily until the entire pattern of internal references can be apprehended as a unity"[315]. In so doing, modern literature locks past and present "in a timeless unity" and achieves a "transformation of the historical imagination into myth – an imagination for which time does not exist"[316]. Yet, these temporal observations are generalizations, which may be difficult to trace in concrete observations about openings.

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[313] David Lodge, *The Modes of Modern Writing* (London: Hodder Arnold, 1977). 45.

[314] Steven G. Kellman, "Grand Openings and Plain: The Poetics of First Lines," *Sub-Stance* 17(1977): 147.

[315] Frank, "Spatial Form in Modern Literature," 13.

[316] Ibid., 60.

Since modernist criticism has turned modernism into a narrative in itself and thereby has made it difficult to approach modernism itself, I propose to analyze it through a communicative approach, just like I did in the case of the Gricean cooperative principle in the previous chapter. I was originally inspired to this approach by Edgar Allen Poe who, as early in 1846, complained about the literary tradition's tight focus on the dénouement[317]. In his provocative explanation of the creative process underlying his most famous poem, "The Raven", Poe announces that the raven's rather unmotivated repetition of "nevermore" is the very pivot of the poem. In this seemingly intentionless refrain "the poem may be said to have its beginning – at the end, where all works of art should begin"[318]. Behind Poe's irony and willingness to astound, we apprehend that the author and his reader are likely to embark on *exact opposite routes* in order to get to the artwork. This is an insight obviously at play in Poe's other artistic production where suspense remains a central component in the crime narrative.

With inspiration in Poe, we can therefore explicate the confusion in the debate over the modernist opening by postulating that there are two opposing models of communication at play: that of writer and that of the reader[319]. According to the first model, the author has an intention or a meaning to transpose through the literary work, which has then been grasped when the intention is received and understood. According to the second model, the comprehension of the work is not driven teleologically by a preexisting intention. As Thomas Docherty says "[a]ttention instead is on the process of producing meanings, and the active reader shares in this never-ending activity. The former model has plots and characters presented as finalized products,

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[317] Edgar Allen Poe, "The Philosophy of Composition," in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed. Vincent B. Leitch (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001 (1846)), 746-47.

[318] Ibid.

[319] Cf. Thomas Docherty, "From Ends to Beginnings: Time and the Plot," in *Reading (Absent) Character: Towards a Theory of Characterization in Fiction* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), 133-34.

semantic facts to be assimilated or consumed by a subservient reader; the latter model has fictions, semiotic processes, which the reader helps produce, as he or she helps produce plots and characters"[320].

The observations about a modernist shift in temporality can thus be explained by a shift in the communicative model of literature. The question is simply which communicative model to prioritize. Our expectations to literature will naturally change if the communicative model surrounding literature changes, and with the communicative model in mind we can precisely ask such historical questions like Porter Abbott's: "Are we not becoming [...] less keenly focused on the end of the story, more prone to want to cruise around [?]"[321]. Approaching the question as a question of communicative model also helps explain why the temporal axis seems to become less conspicuous in modernist novels: "Many novels try to present the reader only with the present action of reading the novel"[322].

This chapter having explored the theoretical concept of intertextuality and its impact on the critical approach to openings, my next chapter explores more concretely the intertextuality of a particular opening.

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[320] Ibid.

[321] Abbott, "The Future of All Future Narratives," 531.

[322] Docherty, "From Ends to Beginnings: Time and the Plot," 138.

– CHAPTER 4 –

Intertextuality of novelistic opening:

A Practice of Openings

"Presque tout l'art consiste à faire oublier à ce lecteur son pouvoir personnel d'intervention"

Paul Valéry, Preface to "Histoires brisées"[323]

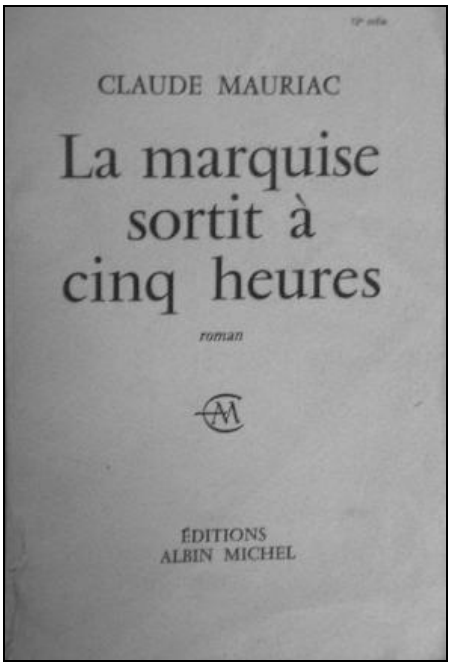

Illustration 4: Claude Mauriac: *La marquise sortit à cinq heures*

[323] Valéry, *Œuvres*, I: 407.

PAUL VALÉRY'S OPENING AND THE DISAPPEARED MARQUISE

"The marquise went out at five o'clock. Where the heck have I read that!?" asks the narrator himself in the opening of Julio Cortázar's novel *Los Premios*[324]. And, indeed, this question is frequently asked. "La Marquise sortit à cinq heures" is no doubt Paul Valéry's most frequently cited sentence and some may know it as a skit of a novelistic opening, meant to encapsulate his critical attitude towards the genre. The sentence, however, turns out to have become a dictum in itself and immediately takes us beyond Valéry's specific claims; it has become, as we shall see, the little motto we find inside an entire cultural rumination on the French novel[325].

When the imagined marquise appears in Cortázar's novel from 1960, she already serves as the perfect example of a sentence we know so well that we may in fact never have read it. In fact, the effectiveness of *Los premios'* opening lies in the apparently ignorant evocation of a famed epitome of an unsuccessful opening, whose origin in any case evades us. Chilean writer

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[324] Julio Cortázar, *Los premios* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Sudamericana, 1960). In the short story "Click" by John Barth, the same line is equally unknown by the two characters, see John Barth, "Click," *The Atlantic Monthly* 280, no. 6, December (1997). This chapter is based on an article that I wrote in French: Niels Buch Leander, "L'intertextualité de l'incipit romanesque," in *Intertextualité, interdiscursivité et intermédialité*, ed. Louis Hébert and Lucie Guillemette (Québec, Canada: Presses de l'Université Laval, 2009). I thank the Presses de l'Université Laval (PUL) for the permission to include the translated chapter in this dissertation.

[325] It is noteworthy that a high number of central, contemporary authors like Éric Chevillard, Georges Baudouin, Daniel Oster and Bernard Magné make reference to Valéry's marquise. Éric Chevillard, "La Marquise toujours recommencée," *Le nouveau recueil - revue trimestrielle de littérature et de critique* 64(2002); Georges Baudouin, "La Marquise sortit à cinq heures," in *Contes à rebours, contes et nouvelles* (Paris: Buchet / Chastel, 1994); Daniel Oster, "'Je ne suis pas de ceux qui aiment les livres pour les livres'," in *Monsieur Valéry* (Paris: Seuil, 1981), 9. Writer and theorist Bernard Magné present the phrase as a central paradigm in the theorization of the novel: "Ces aristocrates [les marquises], notamment lorsqu'elles sortent à cinq heures, jouent dans l'histoire des théories littéraires un rôle aussi important que les rois de France chauves dans celle des théories du signe". Bernard Magné, "Esquisse d'une typologie de la littérature combinatoire," http://perso.club-internet.fr/magneb/professionnel/typologie-combi/typcombi.html. The "bald kings of France" is a reference to Bertrand Russell's famous example in his groundbreaking article dans son article on "empty descriptions", which defined the propositional logic and hence started analytic philosophy. Bertrand Russell, "On Denoting," *Mind* 14(1905).

José Donoso thus wrote his whole *Casa de Campo* (1978) in response to this sentence, yet, without knowing its origin: "Somebody said, and I don't know who it was, that you can't write novels that begin: La Marquise est sortie à cinq heures… And then I set out to prove that novels can be written in that way"[326]. Like Donoso we may know this sentence – we just do not know why we know it[327].

The origin of the Marquise has therefore been the cause of fierce interrogation, critics frequently going to great lengths to locate this very sentence within Valéry's works. These quests have, however, been to no avail. In a letter of 1959 to the Valéry-scholar André Berne-Joffroy, the *Services culturels de SVP* symptomatically quails: "Tous les spécialistes de Valéry connaissent cette phrase, mais pas *un* n'a pu nous dire à quel endroit de son œuvre on peut le retrouver"[328].

We can quickly explain this repeated state of scholarly frustration by the simple fact that this sentence actually appears nowhere in Valéry's works[329]. Yet, such was the state of confusion that in 1959 and in 1964 Berne-Joffroy and Michel Butor saw it necessary to point out that the mocking Marquise cannot be found in Valéry[330]. The sentence exists only as reported in the *Surrealist Manifesto* of 1924, where André Breton writes: "Paul Valéry … à propos de des romans, m'assurait qu'en ce qui le concerne, il se refuserait toujours à écrire: 'La marquise sortit

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[326] Ricardo Gutierrez Mouat, "Beginnings and Returns: An Interview with José Donoso," *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* 12, no. 2, Summer (1992).

[327] Symptomatically, a French website of novelistic openings begins by citing "La marquise sortit à cinq heures" referring to it as a "tranche de vie" and then notes the sentence's author as "anonyme". See http://christian.mathis.perso.sfr.fr/incipit.html.

[328] André Berne-Joffroy, "La Marquise sortit à cinq heures," *Nouvelle Revue Française* 81(1959): 556.

[329] Comparable sentences do, however, occur in Valéry's *Cahiers*, which were published later only as facsimile and only currently in the process of being transcribed by the I.T.E.M.-group at C.N.R.S. in Paris. In the 1960's these notebooks were thus not included as part of Valéry's 'official' *oeuvre*. We shall discuss these fragments below.

[330] Berne-Joffroy, "La Marquise sortit à cinq heures."; Michel Butor, *Répertoire*, vol. II (Paris: Minuit, 1964). 11.

à cinq heures'"[331]. Through this seminal surrealist text, the Marquise was hence propelled into the general literary ethos. Strangely enough, Valéry in fact never *wrote* his most often quoted sentence…

VALÉRY, BRETON AND THE ARBITRARITY OF THE NOVEL

The story of the marquise could therefore end here – and often it does. Valéry-scholars are still constantly asked about the origin of the sentence, but once the Marquise has been revealed to reside only in this peculiar verbal alliance between Breton and Valéry, critical interrogation seems to come to a halt, or as Michel Raimond testifies: "la phrase sur la marquise n'était qu'un propos rapporté, une mauvaise pensée qu'on pouvait chasser"[332]. But why should we heed the function of the Marquise *less* just because it results, not from Valéry's written works, but from a *discussion* between two of the greatest literary authorities at the time? Would this not rather be an indication of the existence of a literary problematic that extends beyond each of them?[333]

Admittedly, there may be something initially implausible about this union of the biblioclastic Breton and the venerable Valéry. In a century that was soon to hail both the artistic and commercial triumph of the novel, the Breton-Valéry alliance quickly comes to stand out as being nothing but an amusing oddity of French literary history: "C'est une de ces heureuses

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[331] André Breton, *Manifeste du surréalisme; Poisson soluble* (Paris: Éditions du Sagittaire, 1924). It may be objected that the sentence of the Marquise does not necessarily have to be an example of an *opening*, but could just be an example of an arbitrary sentence. The marquise, however, is mentioned in a context of an anthology of openings, and in any case the sentence has intuitively been understood as an opening and has played its role as such.

[332] Michel Raimond, *La Crise du roman: des lendemains du naturalisme aux années vingt* (Paris: José Corti, 1966). 132.

[333] One must not forget either that the remark about the marquise is also an intervention in a more general debate about the novel, taking place in Paris in the years 1924-25. See for instance René Boylesve, "Un genre littéraire en danger: le roman," *Revue de France* 5(1924); François Fosca, "Apologie pour le roman," *Revue hebdomadaire* (1925).

rencontres de l'histoire littéraire que cette conjonction de deux génération [Breton et Valéry] et de deux optique opposées dans une même intransigeance à l'égard des compromissions où pouvait se dégrader la littérature"[334]. The two figures seem to belong to opposite sides of the literary spectrum, almost seeming to belong to two different centuries. Yet, the periods of their creative summits overlap rather strikingly. Valéry had been a mentor for the young Breton and even when Breton leaped into dadaism and surrealism and had all the institutional and positional reasons to renounce Valéry's phantom, he did not[335]. Valéry on the other hand was far from absorbed in his protected position as France's official poet, but kept up to date with the developments amongst the youngest poets. Valéry was informed about the surrealist activities, and he is reported to have been a frequent visitor at the *Bureau des recherches surréalistes* in rue de Grenelle. Even the title of their journal, *Littérature*, was apparently proposed by Valéry[336]. For someone not typically commenting on literary figures in his *Cahiers*, it is striking here to find no less than four references to surrealism. Valéry acclaims provocatively that surrealism is "le salut par les déchets"[337], but affirms at another occasion: "j'ai vu naitre ceci, chez moi, toutes les hérésies possibles. L'incomplet développé"[338]. Despite obvious reservations, the surrealist

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[334] Raimond, *La Crise du roman*: 124.

[335] In a ranking of poets that Breton made in the journal "Littérature", Valéry received the grade "15" on a scale from -25 to 20. That grade was even higher than most of the surrealist poets, including Duchamp and Ernst. See Herbert S. Gerschman, "Valéry and Breton," *Yale French Studies* 44(1970).

[336] "Nous [Soupault, Breton, Aragon] décidâmes un beau jour de publier une revue dont le titre nous fut proposé par Paul Valéry: Littérature". Philippe Soupault, "Déposition," *Les Cahiers du mois* 21-22(1926).

[337] *Cahiers* XII, 742. This comes after the text fragment: "Littérature modernissime - A B [André Breton] etc - Maximum de facilité et maximum de scandale - produire le max de scandale par le maximum de facilité". His sceptism is also expressed in *Cahiers* XX: "il est des secrets qui n'ont que leur vertu de secret, et dévoilés ne sont rien – ainsi des effets de substitution des surréalistes … mots croisés" (76).

[338] Valéry, *Cahiers*, XXIII: 656. See also Paul Valéry, *Cahiers*, vol. I (Paris: CNRS). 420. where Valéry takes an "anti-paranoid" position with regard to literature.

project enters into Valéry's field of imagination[339]. Not only does he share their mathematical interest; when making "table rase de tout l'acquit humain", their ideas of the creative activity look strikingly similar.

Nevertheless, except for a few comments by Albert Thibaudet, Jean Cassou and Alexandre Embiricos, few critics of the period notice these ties[340]. On the contrary, Valéry's status as a conservative authority is only reinforced over time. The more Valéry is portrayed as the official "enemy of the novel", a view of himself he acquiesces in[341], the more the novel appears to stand out as the modern genre *par excellence.* Asked about the crisis of the novel, the young novelist Joseph Delteil thus exclaims: "J'aime passionnément le roman! C'est le grand genre moderne […] Et quoi qu'en pense Valéry, j'écris sans la moindre vergogne: "la princesse [sic!] sortit à cinq heures"[342].

At the time of the publication of the surrealist manifesto, Valéry's reservations about the novel were thus widely known. When Jean Cocteau in 1924 sent him a copy of his novel *Le Grand écart*, his dedication ("In the hope that you will this one") testifies to an awareness that

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[339] This observation has also been made by Jacqueline Chénieux-Gendron: "Ces effets de ralenti et cette science des ruptures [de Breton] entrent apparemment dans l'optique valéryenne", Jacqueline Chénieux-Gendron, *Le surréalisme et le roman, 1922-1950* (Lausanne, Suisse: Age d'homme, 1983). 92.

[340] Alexandre Embiricos, "La Galerie des contemporains," *La Revue nouvelle* 1, no. 6 (15 mai 1925). Albert Thibaudet recognizes the existence of a conceptual bound between Valéry and the surrealists notably in their mathematical preoccupations which lead them to see "les problèmes littéraires sous une figure d'abstraction, de limite théorique, d'épure". Moreover, Thibaudet stresses that for both Valery and the surrealists "la pensée est un mouvement ou un résultat, ne prenons pas l'un pour l'autre: il est entendu que je ne donne ici que du mouvement et non un résultat". Albert Thibaudet, "Réflexions sur la littérature - du surréalisme," *Nouvelle Revue Française* XXIV, no. 138 (1925): 138. Jean Cassou equallyrefers to this rapprochement between Valéry and the surrealists. Jean Cassou, "Propos sur le surréalisme," *Nouvelle Revue Française* XXIV, no. 1er janvier (1925).

[341] "On m'a fait l'ennemi du roman", Valéry, *Œuvres*, I: 1835.

[342] Joseph Delteil, "Interview menée par Lefèvre," *Nouvelles littéraires*, 16 mai 1925.

one has to persuade Valéry to read novels[343]. Simultaneously, in the magazine *La Renaissance*, Sorbonne-professor Fortunat Strowski referred generally to the anti-novelistic attitude of the period as "Valérysme". Yet, his article, "Le Valérysme contre le roman", surprisingly does not discuss Valéry at all, but rather Pierre Lafue's anti-novelistic attitude, simply taking for granted that the readers of the magazine are familiar with Valéry's position[344]. In a follow-up article, "Pour le valérysme", Strowski attempts to justify the use of the term by merely accepting that "valérysme" may have little to do with Valéry, but may serve heuristically: "Il y a des noms qui sont plus que des denominations. Ils jouent un rôle symbolique; ils permettent aux esprits de s'unir, sans les arrêter dans les limites étroites d'une idée ... Ce mot, ce nom il m'a semblé que je devais le prendre au rayonnement qui entoure l'œuvre et la personne de M. Paul Valéry. De là le valerysme"[345]. In other words, at this point Valéry has already become shorthand for an outmoded, literary predisposition leading, for instance, novelist Edmond Jaloux to dismiss0 Valéry's anti-novelistic grievance as nothing but symbolist discrimination[346]. In his seminal work on the French novel, "La Crise du roman", Michel Raimond can finally mollify the debate by nullifying the *Manifesto*'s provocation: "la marquise n'était qu'une boutade. Elle procédait d'une réflexion insuffisante sur la nature propre du roman"[347].

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[343] This dedication appears in Valéry's personal library that I worked on in the year 2001-2002 for the University of Newcastle and the I.T.E.M.-group at the C.N.R.S. This dedication proved futile, however, as it appears from the state of the book that Valéry did not read even this Cocteau-novel.

[344] Fortunat Strowski, "Le Valérysme contre le roman," *La Renaissance: Politique, littéraire, artistique*, 2 mai 1925.

[345] Fortunat Strowski, "Pour le Valérysme," *La Renaissance: Politique, Littéraire, Artistique*, 23 mai 1925.

[346] "Ce scrupule est un phénomène particulier à la génération symboliste, il n'est pas très éloigné du sentiment qui a fait siffler l'Othello de Vigny par une salle exaspérée d'entendre sur la scene prononcer le mot 'mouchoir'. La levée de boucliers actuelle contre le roman n'a pas d'autre sens". Edmond Jaloux, "L'Esprit des livres - Pierre Louÿs," *Les Nouvelles littéraires*, 13 juin 1925.

[347] Raimond, *La Crise du roman*: 136.

Underplaying Valéry's alliance with Breton may, however, mean that we do not realize the full extent of his preoccupation with the question of prose[348]. Admittedly, in his less generous moments, Valéry compares poetry with *sound* and the novel simply with *noise.* Yet, his discontent with the novel, which is instrumental in provoking the debate of 1924-5 in which Delteil and Jaloux intervened, also reveals a genuine preoccupation precisely with prose that pivots around the problem of opening the literary work[349]. The Marquise was thus, according to Breton, associated with a whole anthology of novelistic openings that Valéry hoped to gather: "Par besoin d'épuration, M. Paul Valéry proposait dernièrement de réunir en anthologie un aussi grand nombre que possible de débuts de roman, de l'inanité desquels il attendait beaucoup. Les auteurs les plus fameux seraient mis à contribution"[350]. In spite of this sarcasm, the Marquise will in fact emerge as a technical challenge to be met by subsequent novelists[351]. Contrary to Strowski's premonition about the destructive nature of "valérysme", Valéry's dissatisfaction with the novel appears to have helped to bring about a reform of the genre precisely by adding "sa réflexion intérieure à cet art de composer", thus providing a prerequisite for the formulation of a new kind of novel[352]. Valéry appears, not as the archenemy of the novel, but in fact as a

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[348] A preoccupation which has been convincingly demonstrated in Michel Jarrety, *Valéry devant la littérature : mesure de la limite*, 1 ed., Ecrivains (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1991); Silvio Yeschua, "La marquise sortit à cinq heures," in *Valéry, le roman et l'œuvre à faire* (Paris: Minard, 1976).

[349] Paul Valéry, *Ego Scriptor : Poèmes et petits poèmes abstraits* (Paris: NRF Gallimard, 1992). 136.

[350] Breton, *Manifeste du surréalisme; Poisson soluble*.

[351] In addition to the novelists that I discussed in the first part of this chapter, I could mention Walter Lewino's book, which proclaims to fulfill Valéry's project of collecting an anthology of openings. Walter Lewino, *Longtemps je me suis couché de travers. Incipit* (Paris: Maurice Nadeau, 1994). I also think of the Jean Ricardou's question in his article Jean Ricardou, "Le nouveau roman est-il valéryen ?," in *Entretiens sur Paul Valéry*, ed. Émilie Noulet-Carner (Paris / La Haye: Éditions Mouton & Co., 1968).

[352] "Madame Bovary est le chef-d'œuvre de la 'composition' classique. C'est dans ce sens que le Valérysme pourra réformer le roman, en ajoutant sa réflexion intérieure à cet art de composer. Mais il perdrait son temps à vouloir le détruire". Strowski, "Le Valérysme contre le roman," 18..

theorist of prose, which may help us explain why Jorge Borges – to everyone's surprise – characterizes Valéry as first and foremost a prose-writer[353].

The French novel has always lived a much more turbulent life that modern readers imagine. Despite its growing commercial success and fairly consistent artistic achievement, the novel had been regarded with suspicion by the Parisian intellectual milieu since 17th century poetologist Boileau dismissed the novel as a ridiculous and easy genre, inferior in its literary structure and implausible as mimetic project. Despite a 19th century saturated by novelists like Balzac, Stendhal, Flaubert, Maupassant, and Zola, the anti-novelistic bias in Paris at the beginning of the 20th century was no less than substantial. In fact, the talk even of a 'crisis' in the novel was altogether pervasive, especially after *Nouvelle Revue Française*-editor Jacques Rivière in 1913 made this crisis 'official'[354]. In 1924, when the surrealist manifesto appears, the novel was only at the brink of the breakthorugh of the so-called modernist novelists, represented in France notably by Marcel Proust. However, the critique of the novel seemed almost to grow proportional with the genre's success. In the interwar period, the German aesthetician William Bonsels held his anti-novelistic conferences in France to which a special issue of *les Nouvelles littéraires* appearing in the first months of 1924 was entirely devoted[355]. When Breton's anti-novelistic *Manifesto* was published later that year, certainly more than simple provocation was at

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[353] "L'insigne poète et encore meilleur prosateur Paul Valéry fait actuellement un cours d'art poétique au Collège de France". Jorge Luis Borges, "'Introduction à la poétique' de Paul Valéry," in *Œuvres* (Paris: Gallimard, 1938), 1154. In the debate concerning Valéry's marquise, it had in fact been insinuated by Pierre Lièvre and Léon Pierre-Quint that Valéry was a better prose-writer than poet, see for instance Léon Pierre-Quint, "Lectures," *Revue de France* VI, no. 2 (1er avril 1926): 531ff.

[354] Jacques Rivière, "Le Roman d'aventure," *Nouvelle Revue Française* 5, no. 53-55 (mai-juin-juillet) (1913). For further discussion of this crisis, see Raimond, *La Crise du roman*. Moreover, see my article on the adventure genre and the development of the modern French novel, Niels Buch Leander, "The Colonial Metropolis and Its Artistic Adventure: Conrad, Congo, and the Nouvelle Revue Francaise," *Romanic Review* 99, no. 1-2 (2008).

[355] Les Nouvelles littéraires, 19 January 1924.

stake, the time being more than ripe for various French literary magazines, in particular the ubiquitous *Nouvelles littéraires*, to face the debate and invite contemporary novelists to comment and – typically – refute Valéry's marquise in their ambition to circumvent the prevailing 'Valérysm' of the intellectual elite.

In these literary interviews, however, the novelists all seem to forget Valéry's exact phrase. In his passion for the novel Joseph Delteil elevates the marquise's aristocratic standing when confirming that he would "feel no shame whatsoever" in writing "La princesse sortit à cinq heures"[356]. And Edmond Jaloux turns the marquise's movements around when talking of "la marquise rentra chez elle à cinq heures", an opening actually far more perplexing than Valéry's[357]. Even one year after the surrealist manifesto, the Marquise lost its origins in the permutations of polemics and becomes a sentence without a clear origin.

These permutations, however, precisely reflect one of Valéry's reservations about the novel; its so-called 'contingency'. Playing in the *Cahiers* with a 'countess' who "prit le train de 8 heures" and a marquise who "prit le train de 9 heures", Valéry adds "je puis varier ainsi indéfiniment dans le mou"[358]. It is the fact that one can change this sentence – that it is 'arbitrary' – that bothers him. As a young man, he writes in his *Cahiers*: "je ne pourrais écrire de roman que si j'avais un domestique pour écrire à ma place tout ce qu'y faut d'arbitraire"[359]. And this bias remains with him throughout his life. In a late letter on his attitude *vis-à-vis* the novel, he expands on this discontent with novelistic sentences' possible arbitrariness:

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[356] Delteil, "Interview menée par Lefèvre."

[357] Jaloux, "L'Esprit des livres - Pierre Louÿs."

[358] Paul Valéry, *Cahiers*, vol. V (Paris: CNRS). 101.

[359] Ibid., I: 744.

> [Les romans] doivent donc se garder d'éveiller la faculté d'invention, qui, dans le détail, est chez tous au moins égale à celle de l'auteur, et qui pourrait, à chaque instant, diaboliquement s'exercer et se divertir à lui modifier son texte, à faire intervenir l'infini des possibilités de substitutions que tout récit admet sans altération sensible de son thème…[360].

With Valéry's emphasis on the possibilities of substitution, it is consequently rather paradoxical that people are so eager to find the precise wording in Valéry's works!

The concepts of the 'contingent' and the 'necessary' have already been evoked by critics investigating Valéry's qualms about the novel[361]. To associate "contingency" with the novel and "necessity" with poetry does, however, seem too schematic a dichotomy and may obfuscate the context of Valéry's ideas on the novel. More generally, Valéry defies the novelistic idea of reality, or rather the idea that the novel *captures* reality: In his *Cahiers,* on the very same page as his small Marquise-permutations, Valéry notes: "Romans.[…] Aussi arbitraire que le réel"[362]. In other words, I claim that Valéry's reservation regarding the novel works in parallel with his even better-known reservation about history[363].

THE ILLUSORY ORIGIN OF THE STORY

We must therefore underline the problematic of *origins* as a foundation both of history and of a story. If history consists in a search for chronology, causality, and origins, typically in the ambition of elucidating a present state, such an enterprise cannot take us far since to Valéry the

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[360] Valéry, *Œuvres*, I: 1835.

[361] For instance by Gérard Genette, "Littérature comme telle," in *Figures I* (Paris: Seuil, 1966), 255.

[362] Valéry, *Cahiers*, V: 101.

[363] This point is further supported by the abovementioned letter, cf. footnote 360, in which Valéry simultaneously discusses his discontent with the novel and with history.

very concept of origins is questionable: "L'origine est, en tout, imaginaire"[364]. An origin cannot be but an act of imagination, an arbitrary choice, and, if meant to secure constancy or a foundation, surely an "illusion": "Certains vont au plus loin de l'origine, qui est coïncidence de la présence et de l'événement *initial* – et essaient d'aller dans cet écart trouver l'or, le diamant"[365]. Such a quest for the chronological foundations of history is conceptually flawed – and can be nothing but history *as* story – precisely because it will inescapably contain the present moment as its reference frame: "toute pensée de l'origine des choses n'est jamais qu'une rêverie de leur disposition actuelle, une manière de dégénérescence du réel, une variation sur ce qui est"[366]. The past is, in other words, a pure product of the present: "Car *ce qui fût* est esprit, et n'a de propriétés qui ne soient pas de l'esprit"[367]. This mental projection about the past can then only lead to the idea of the individual's present potentiality; and any imagination of origin can serve only as a creative beginning, which explains Valéry's famous, but enigmatic aphorism "Au commencement était la fable", which I also discussed in chapter 1 (on p. 32), and which showed that the past is staged in the creative mind[368].

A beginning can hence never be a foundation, but will follow as a consequence of an imaginative enterprise, even when appearing to consist of chaos: "ce chaos inconcevable est

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[364] Valéry, *Cahiers*, XXIII: 592.

[365] Valéry, *Cahiers* XV: 526, quoted by Martin Rueff, "Robinson, une vue de l'esprit (À propos du *Robinson* de Paul Valéry)," *Critica del testo: rivista quadrimestrale* 2(2002). Compare with "origine est une illusion" Valéry, *Œuvres*, II: 1451.

[366] "Au sujet d'Eureka" in Valéry, *Œuvres*, I: 863.

[367] "Au commencement était la fable", in ibid., 394.

[368] In a small manuscript by Valéry from 1921, the creativity of Orpheus is described as beginning only when the past fades entirely and becomes inconceivable: "Commencement d'Orphée – je suis né sans le savoir, sans le vouloir, vers ce temps qui est devenu fabuleux, et qui est si vieux qu'il passe pour n'avoir pas été. C'est là la façon dont le temps vieillit : non seulement il n'est plus, mais il n'est plus concevable et il semble impossible qu'il ait été". Valéry, "Commencement d'Orphée."

ordonné à mon dessein de concevoir. J'ai moi-même brouillé les cartes, afin de pouvoir débrouiller"[369].

This devotion to the extreme potential is what refrains Valéry from venturing into prose: "Cette sensation des possibilités, très forte chez moi, m'a toujours détourné de la voie du récit"[370]. The traditional novel precisely pretends that everything follows from a particular beginning – that its beginning is absolute. Whereas poetry is privileged by being "tout le temps un commencement"[371], a novel suffers from the same flaw as any historical narrative: quite simply, it begins only once. Yet, the possible permutations of opening lines ("la marquise prit le train à 8 heures", etc) indicate that the beginning of any story is itself a story in its own right – "Au commencement était la fable".

THE OPENING AND THE RENEWAL OF THE NOVEL

Valéry's proposal to gather an anthology of openings of novels may not be as sarcastically meant as Breton's manifesto insinuates. What if the beginnings became continuous? What if a novel constantly started all over? What if a novel contained nothing but beginnings? This reflection seems to shape precisely one of Valéry's only prose projects, the peculiar "Histoires brisées". These "broken" or "shattered" story lines (or histories, for that matter) are written by a method that testifies to a genuine fascination with the potentiality of the novelistic opening: "j'écris un

[369]Valéry, *Œuvres*, I: 863.

[370] Preface to "Histoires brisées", Valéry, *Œuvres*, II: 408.

[371] *Cahiers* XXIV, 862. Quoted by Jarrety, *Valéry devant la littérature*: 119.

conte comme si ce fût là le commencement d'un ouvrage […] Au bout de peu de lignes ou d'une page, j'abandonne, n'ayant saisi par l'écriture que ce qui m'avait surpris, amusé, intrigué"[372].

These stories thus remain open-ended and take on a virtual quality, which to Valéry preserves their appeal: "je sais que l'ouvrage n'existera pas, je sens que j'ignore où il irait, et que l'ennui me prendrait si je m'appliquais à le conduire à quelque fin bien déterminée"[373]. What disturbs Valéry in a completed novel is its sense of determination, that is to say, its pretence that its elements are predetermined, that from the beginning "things" could not have been otherwise: "Tout roman peut recevoir un ou plusieurs dénouements tout autres que celui qu'il offre"[374]. It is not so such the fact that a novel *can* be modified, but the fact that the novel, and presumably the realistic novel in particular, *pretends* that it cannot be modified. A novel pretends to be determined by its beginning, and in this manner tries to hide what is *necessarily contingent* behind its own logic of necessity.

The reflection on the opening seems to instill in Valéry a vision of a work that escapes such determination:

> Faire une fois une œuvre qui montrerait à chacun de ses nœuds, la diversité qui s'y peut présenter à l'esprit, et parmi laquelle il choisit la suite unique qui sera donnée dans le texte. Ce serait là substituer à l'illusion d'une détermination

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[372] Valéry, *Œuvres*, II: 407. In his *Cahiers*, Valéry described the consistency and fidelity of the opening : "Je regarde un texte que j'ai écrit en 94 et me reconnais en 38 – c'est-à-dire 44 ans après dans la manière de former le début, - de me proposer le 'sujet', de m'y introduire et de mener ce commencement vers les positions qui me permettront de me retrouver dans cette région indéterminée – l'aire d'un sujet donné". *Cahiers* XXI: 379. See also Jeannine Jallat, "Le reste et l'incipit. Sur la genèse d'un commencement valéryen," *Littérature* 64, décembre(1986).

[373] Valéry, *Œuvres*, II: 407.

[374] Ibid., 407-08.

> unique et imitatrice du réel, celle du possible-à-chaque instant, qui me semble plus véritable[375].

Reading the *Cahiers*, we thus notice that it is precisely in the year of the dispute over the marquise that Valéry begins to imagine writing – a novel. In 1925 he writes to himself: "Je *dois* faire un roman. Tout homme en fait un, comme jadis tragédie" and even specifies how he will begin writing it: "chercher des noms et commencer par là. A tâtons"[376]. At times Valéry simply accepts the limitations of the genre, for instance when noting: "Dans les romans, les 'descriptions' jouent, qu'on le veuille ou non, le rôle de parties de musique. Donc, si tu fais un roman, sache le et accuse ce caractère à la limite du possible"[377]. Most often, however, Valéry seems interested in circumventing the conventions of the genre in the light of his own poetics: "J'ai songé à un roman qui irait délibérément *contre la réalité* au sens des romanciers. Mais fait de personnages et de situations *construits*"[378].

This novel is obviously never written. Yet, the formulation of a new kind of novel novel is in the shaping: "Pourquoi un 'roman' ne serait-il pas le journal d'une journée de quelqu'un ? […] Enchaînement incohérent et pourtant enchaînement de substitutions de moments et phases"[379], a description that fits surprisingly well with two major novels appearing in English in this period: James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) and Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925). One could in fact claim to see the contours of such a novelistic journal in Valéry's cycle of prose

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[375] Valéry, *Œuvres*, I: 1497. Quoted by Genette, "Littérature comme telle," 255-56.

[376] *Cahiers* XI: 299. Quoted by Jarrety, *Valéry devant la littérature*: 342.

[377] Valéry, *Cahiers VII*: 192

[378] *Cahiers* XVII: 699. Quoted by Jarrety, *Valéry devant la littérature*: 331.

[379] *Cahiers* XVII: 699. Quoted by Jarrety, *Valéry devant la littérature*: 331.

poems, "Alphabet", as a modern book of hours structured around the letters of the alphabet[380]. Opened in 1924 by the letter A as "Au commencement sera le sommeil" – an evident reference to his much discussed aphorism – the temporal renewal under each letter here seems to allow Valéry to maintain that level of continual beginning that his verse would usually create.

THE ANTI-NATURALIST OPENING FROM HUYSMANS TO QUENEAU

This aspect of temporal sequencing seems to be what fascinates Valéry in the handful of novels he did read and appreciate. He thus describes the novels of J.-K. Huysmans as a "flux des heures intactes" and his annotations in *À rebours* (1884) emphasize his particular way of appreciating the prose of Huysmans[381]. Whereas he hardly ever made annotations in the few novels he read, Valéry marked a keyword in the beginning of each chapter of *À rebours*[382]. These keywords do not touch on what "happens" in Huysmans' novel (admittedly, very little does happen in this novel); they evoke simply a sensation of each chapter as if each chapter was independent and had its own beginning.

If we put Valéry's tenet that an origin is illusory aside for a second and insist on finding the real origin of Valéry's Marquise, it is precisely in Huysmans that we ought to look. In his famous critique of Zola in the 1903-preface to *À rebours*, Huysmans indicates that the naturalist novel simply prolongs an obsession with social relations that has characterized the genre since the libertine novel:

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[380] Valéry, *Alphabet*.

[381] In Valéry's article from 1898 in the Mercure de France. See Raimond, *La Crise du roman*: 58. Notice also the numerous references to Huysmans throughout the work of Valéry: Valéry, *Œuvres*, I: 663m, 742b-56, 57m, 81b-83; Valéry, *Œuvres*, II: 802m, 1001b, 186h, 204m, 327h.

[382] "Les Lectures de Valéry : catalogue et corpus de notes marginales de la bibliothèque personnelle de Paul Valéry", edited by Brian Stimpson, forthcoming.

> Quoi qu'on inventât, le roman se pouvait résumer en ces quelques lignes : savoir pourquoi monsieur un Tel commettait ou ne commettait pas l'adultère avec madame une Telle ; si l'on voulait être distingué et se déceler, ainsi qu'un auteur de meilleur ton, l'on plaçait l'œuvre de chair entre une marquise et un comte ; si l'on voulait, au contraire, être un écrivain populacier, un prosateur à la coule, on la comptait entre un soupirant de barrière et une fille quelconque ; le cadre seul différait. [...] *[Le lecteur] continue à savourer les hésitations de la marquise*[383].

In this light, the "five o'clock" of Valéry's marquise appears precisely to be a mockery of the openings of Zola's novels. No less than six of Zola's novels open by a similar temporal indication, for instance *Le Débâcle* (1892) that begins by informing the reader that "Six heures sonnaient aux clochers de tous les villages" and *La Joie de vivre* (1884) that opens: "Comme six heures sonnaient au coucou de la salle à manger, Chanteau perdit tout espoir"[384]. It is thus hardly a coincidence that *Les Sœurs Vatard* (1879), a novel that Huysmans wrote under the influence of Émile Zola, opens by: "Deux heures du matin sonnèrent". The temporal indication was a naturalist stigmatisation that he later was to renounce[385].

Julio Cortázar's reference to Valéry's marquise, with which this chapter began, thus serves as an indication of how the critique of the traditional novel was articulated through an exposition of the novelistic mode of opening. Experimental novelists of the postwar period thus seem to transform Valéry's discontent with the novel into a well-defined artistic challenge. Julien Gracq thus attempts to justify the noveslistic opening by a delay in the construction of meaning: "La vérité est que le romancier ne peut pas dire 'La marquise sortit à cinq heures': une telle

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[383] My italics. Joris-Karl Huysmans, *À rebours* (Paris: Argenteuil, 1924 [1884]).

[384] Émile Zola, *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Cercle du livre précieux, 1966).

[385] Joris-Karl Huysmans, *Les soeurs Vatard* (Paris: G. Charpentier, 1879).

phrase, à ce stade de la lecture, n'est même pas perçue : il dépose seulement, dans une nuit non encore éclairée, un accessoire de scène destiné à devenir significatif plus tard, quand le rideau sera vraiment levé"[386].

Queneau's *Le Dimanche de la vie* (1951) had initiated a mockery of temporal indications by beginning a chapter by "C'était cinq heures d'octobre", and his later *Les Fleurs bleues* (1965) and *Zazie dans le métro* (1959) seem further to expose Zola's clichéd openings in ways that remind us of Valéry's imagined opening: "Cinq heures sonnaient à l'église du village" and "quatre heures sonnèrent au clocher d'une église voisine"[387]. Evidence of Queneau's direct inspiration from Valéry can be found in his *Cent mille milliards de poèmes* (1961) in which precisely 10% of the sonnets begin by "C'était à cinq o'clock que sortit la marquise"[388]. In the very same year Claude Mauriac takes Valéry's sentence as the very guiding principle of his novel, completing the irony by naming the novel *La Marquise sortit à cinq heures* (1961). Like Cortázar's novel from the year before, Mauriac's novel opens by this sentence without being determined by it[389]. The marquise who went out at five o'clock thus comes to serve as a theoretical motto that condenses the direction that the French novel was to take after the Second World War when breaking with the constraints of the traditional novelistic opening.

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[386] Julien Gracq, *En lisant en écrivant* (Paris: Corti, 1981). 119.

[387] Raymond Queneau, *Le dimanche de la vie* (Paris: Gallimard, 1951). 68; Raymond Queneau, *Les fleurs bleues* (Paris: Gallimard, 1965). 163; Raymond Queneau, *Zazie dans le métro* (Paris: Gallimard, 1959). 114.

[388] Raymond Queneau, *Cent mille milliards de poèmes* (Paris: NRF Gallimard, 1961).

[389] Claude Mauriac, *La marquise sortit à cinq heures; roman* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1961). See also his *Le Dîner En Ville* that can be opened anywhere since it is nothing but one long dinner conversation. Claude Mauriac, *Le dîner en ville* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1959).

– EPILOGUE –

Beginning without End?

OPENINGS AS RELATIONS TO CONVENTIONS

As I observed in chapter 2, the pre-modern novel managed to draw little attention to its beginnings. This was paradoxically achieved, I argued, by making the opening stand out from the body of text while abiding to conventional generic rules for beginning: the reader can *see* that it is a beginning. The inherent challenge is that a beginning cannot be 'natural' in its own right; it is only by fulfilling certain conventional expectations that a novel's beginning will seem natural. I have shown in chapter 1, for instance, that a beginning cannot lend its naturalness from its analogy with birth; in the discussed examples, such an opening strategy tends to poke fun of precisely the *artificiality* of this naturalness.

The textual conventions of what constitutes a proper beginning will, however, change over time. Supported by linguistic studies, I have shown a shift away from the use of existential openings, which was common prior to the 19th century ("there was x"). In the 19th century, the use of proper names instead became frequent in the openings, and in the 20th century even unintroduced pronouns, such as "he", could open a novel, thereby adding increasingly higher levels of what I call "perspectival abruptness". This perspectival abruptness is to be understood in its contrast to the temporal abruptness that we know as *in medias res*.

I have also argued that a change in the opening will change the conditions for the novel's possible resolution. Narratologists have demonstrated, for instance, that openings that use a

reflector-character will tend to be abrupt and open, and that open beginnings will also create *open-ended* stories that do not easily find a *dénouement*.

What constitutes a literary opening is in other words historically determined and will reflect a whole range of cultural aspects. Some periods and some authors will favor an opening that also appears chronologically to be a beginning; that is to say, where 'story' and 'presentation' ('*fabula'* and *'sjuzhet'*) overlap chronologically as much as possible, as I discussed in chapter 2. A beginning belongs to the abstract level of the story whereas an opening belongs to the concrete level of the presentation; a literary opening is simply where the reader embarks or is supposed to embark on the text. This distinction is important, but what is even more important is the fact that literary works ostensibly question literary openings' dependency on the concept of beginnings by casting doubt on the solidity of beginnings themselves. As Anthony Nuttall puts it, there is an underlying suspicion that all natural beginnings could thus simply be cultural fictions[390]. If beginnings can never be truly 'natural', the work that remains is to instate the text's own authority by a forceful opening – and this explains much of the abruptness of the modern literary opening.

With a contemporary perspective, my assertion is rather that beginnings are precisely important to study because they highlight the "randomness" of the composition. The divergence between *fabula* and *sjuzhet* that I discussed in chapter 2 is distinctive of the text, and an opening fully radicalizes the choice of presentation: the opening becomes a rich manifestation of authorial choice. The more the textual scenario is open, the more a choice of beginning becomes indicative of the author's choice of one approach rather than another. As I illustrated in chapter 3 and 4 on intertextuality, the opening becomes the moment where the author constitutes a space

[390] Nuttall, *Openings*: 195.

for the *text* before it constitutes a space for the *story*. This separation between *fabula* and *sjuzhet* is most radicalized in the opening of a novel due to the divergence between opening and beginning. To express it in positive terms: the opening is therefore what best highlights the very *littérarité* of a novel. It is indeed the "lieu littéraire par excellence", as I quoted Italo Calvino in my prologue[391].

FRENCH VS. AMERICAN CRITICISM

One of the central pillars of my dissertation has been the great schism between Anglo-American and French (and to some extent also German) criticism. Specifically French criticism seems preoccupied with openings and the symbolism of beginnings, whereas Anglo-American criticism on the same subject is practically non-existent. I have further substantiated this claim in my appendix where I chronically list the critical texts that have dealt with openings. In this appendix as well as in chapter 3 it becomes clear that, if English-speaking critics are generally little concerned with beginnings, they are strikingly more likely to discuss the very opposite: endings. This generalization does seem to be substantiated by the following observation: The few Anglo-American scholars who are interested in openings are often Romance scholars inspired by

[391] Calvino, "Appendice: cominciare e finire."

Continental methodologies[392]. Moreover, the few Americanists who are interested in openings are often of French nationality[393].

I am well aware that my generalization on the basis of national critical traditions cannot avoid being schematic, as there will be numerous exceptions to such a generalization. Yet, my contention is that the schematism nevertheless generates insights, which would otherwise not be noticed.

The way that a literary work is written obviously also determines the way that it will be read. Some works are written in a way that encourages a more "open" reading and some a more "closed" reading. This open or closed nature can be detected in formal traits, for instance when perspectival abruptness is used to enhance the impression of openness, as I pursued in chapter 2. But whatever the formal traits of the literary work may be, the critic's perception of an opening also determines the reception of the work.

It seems fair to say that French criticism has traditionally been more concerned with literature's formal aspects, and this could be expected also to be the case when it comes to a formal unit like the literary opening. Part of the explanation of this difference is to be found in the fact that the two critical traditions have been differently influenced by the hermeneutic and the phenomenological lines of thought, which inescably determines the approach to such critical

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[392] For instance, David R. Ellison, "Proust and Kafka: On the Opening of Narrative Space," *Modern Language Notes* 101, no. 5 (1986); Graham Falconer, "L'entrée en matière chez Balzac: prolégomènes à une étude sociocritique," in *La Lecture sociocritique du texte romanesque* (Toronto: Stevens & Hakkert, 1975); Freeman G. Henry, *Beginnings in French Literature*, French Literature Series (Amsterdam/New York: Rodopi, 2002). See the appendix for further references.

[393] Jean-Claude Marimoutou, "Ulysse, Jacques, la Muse et le grand Rouleau," in *Représentation de l'origine: littérature, histoire, civilisation* (Saint-Denis (Réunion): Publications de l'université de la Réunion, 1987); André Topia, "Incipit joyciens: le foetus et le dictionnaire," in *L'incipit. Actes Du Colloque De Poitiers 29-30 Mars 1996*, ed. Liliane Louvel (Poitiers: La Licorne, 1997); Carola Veit, "The Evolution of Samuel Beckett's 'nouvelle écriture'," in *Commencements Du Roman: Conférences Du Séminaire De Littérature Comparée De L'université De La Sorbonne Nouvelle*, ed. Jean Bessière (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2001). See the appendix for further references.

concepts as interpretation and authorial intentionality. Yet, this cannot be the whole explanation of the French preoccupation with openings since Anglo-American critics readily discuss another formal unit: the ending. I therefore conclude that the schism is not simply a question of formal priorities, but a question of the approach to the literary field as a whole.

My point is that value or even ideology is attached to the notion of the literary opening. Simply put, one can react to openness in either a positive or negative way, and this attitude to openness is again reflected in the critics' approach to openings. The discussion of openings is intrinsically related to grander considerations such as the very role of literature in society. Is the overall role of literature fundamentally statically to *describe* society, or is it instead dynamically to *transform* society? The schism between French and American criticism with regard to openings is partly due to this difference in the *ideological* perception of the role of literature in society. In this way, the avant-garde French preoccupation with openings relates to an overarching critical stance that generally perceives the text as interacting directly with society[394]. By contrast, it is precisely characteristic of an American branch of criticism like New Criticism, which did not appeal to openings despite its formal interest, that it perceives the literary as an *autonomous* object, which is to be analyzed in its *own right*. Schematically speaking, in the American tradition, openness has a negative ideological connotation as it is by default associated with nonresolution.

It is thus characteristic that central French critics (e.g. Hamon and del Lungo) perceive the opening as "liminal", as an act of transgression itself, as if it were or would be a political object. Moreover, there is a clear tendency to perceive the narrative not as a structuring unit, but

[394] See footnote 302 on page 159. There are of course many exceptions to this generalization, as one could not claim that for instance the criticism of Gérard Genette or the journal *Poétique* is concerned with society.

as a potential trap, which threatens to capture the reader. "Le récit est un piège", as Aragon exclaims in his seminal text *Les incipit*. The French tradition is therefore skeptical with regard to the possibility of interacting directly with the opening without a prejudiced or predefined mind. The French critics are less prone to adopt what could be called "the myth of close reading" according to which "nothing is given from the beginning"[395]. The French stance is very well expressed by the following extract from *Finnegans Wake:* "The idea of the 'erste Akt' can only ever be a fiction; innocence is always already lost"[396].

It is important to note that this difference in the approach to the textual beginning mirrors a grander schism between Continental and Anglo-American philosophy. This schism concerns the possibility of perceiving the world as if nothing is given from the beginning, as British empiricism postulates, whereas French and Continental philosophers like Descartes and Kant postulate that the mind is pre-defined with concepts that structure our perception already from the outset (the so-called "innate ideas"). This symmetry between philosophical traditions and literary criticism is not coincidental. It shows how minute, literary preoccupations are shaped by larger philosophical and ideological movements. The literary opening is no exception in this regard.

CRITICISM AND THE OPENING AS "EPITAPH"

Brombert begins his article on opening signals by quoting Samuel Beckett's declaration: "the end is in the beginning"[397]. This epigraph also evokes T. S. Eliot's use of Mary Stuart's famous

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[395] Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction - Contemporary Poetics* (London: Routledge, 1983).

[396] James Joyce, *Finnegans wake* (London: Penguin, 1999 [1939]). 28.

[397] Brombert, "Opening Signals in Narrative."; Samuel Beckett, *Endgame* (New York, NY: Grove Press, 1958).

motto in his *East* Coker, which is the second of his *Four Quartets*: Eliot begins the poem "In my beginning is my end" and ends it "in my end is my beginning". Brombert's choice of this epigraph for his article suggests that openings are mainly an object of study because they can tell us something about the *end* of the work and thus about its resolution. Openings merely send us "signals", as Brombert's title suggests, of what is to come or of what could come. The focus is still the *telos* and the resolution, and the study of beginnings is, in other words, just more economical way of studying a work.

T. S. Eliot made sure to have the above motto as the epitaph on his grave in East Coker. This provides us with an image of the Anglo-American approach to openings: the opening can serve not only as the "epigraph" of the text, but also as the "epitaph" of a text, that is to say, it is already presumed that the work is closed or concluded; or at least that it will be concluded; that the text will come to an end, to a resolution.

To view the opening as an "epitaph" obviously constitutes a powerful critical instrument. For one thing it aims at giving us an interpretation of the work as a whole on the basis of the beginning. This Aristotelian *inductive* reminiscence could easily be compatible with the scholarly provision of interpretations of *single* works, which has been the main preoccupation of Anglo-American criticism before its late turn to the "pursuit of signs", as Jonathan Culler calls the linguistically inspired critical orientation.

When speculating about the differences between the critical traditions, it is relevant to remember Wolfgang Iser's comment about the antagonism between fiction's interpretative openness and fiction's ability of illusion-making: "The polysemantic nature of the text and the illusion-making of the reader are opposed factors"[398]. This means in principle that although the

[398] Iser, Wolfgang. "The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach." *New Literary History* 3 (1972): 279-99.

reader can accept a high level of polysemantism, there is a limit where the polysemantic nature of the text threatens to lose the reader.

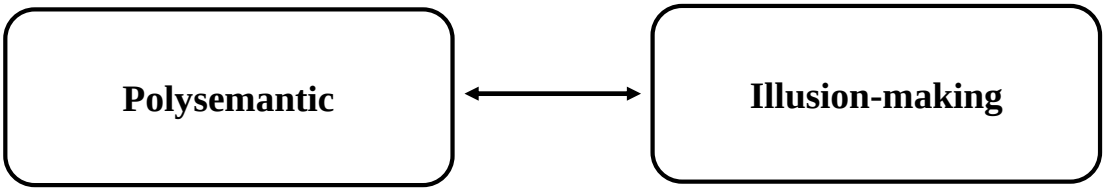

Figure 9: The nature of literature

These two opposing factors seem also to be at play in the opposition between the Anglo-American and the French critical traditions. In his analysis of Proust, Gérard Genette is for instance preoccupied with the formal techniques of "multiplication", through which he identifies no less than five beginnings in Proust[399]. The French approach to beginnings is very well reflected in the glorification of this polysemantism, and the strong emphasis on intertextuality is an effective way of breaking down the linearity of the text[400]. This goes surprisingly well hand-in-hand with the following stance by Kermode: "We are in a world of which it needs to be said *not* that plural readings are possible (for this is true of all narrative) but that *the illusion of the single right reading is possible no longer*"[401]. This stance does place the level of illusion-making in the background, but this is not unproblematic for the reader. As Kermode exclaims, the reader's "difficulties are those of falsified expectation or hermeneutic deception; of incomplete closure; and of a failure to understand the preferential treatment given to latent as against

[399] Genette, "Discours du récit," 85-89.

[400] Jenny quoted in Allen, *Intertextuality*: 113.

[401] Kermode, "Novels: Recognition and Deception," 111.

manifest significance"[402]. We recognize that reading involves "unconscious complicity with arbitrary authority"[403], but reading requires a competence which cannot be achieved without the instability of the narrative progression. It does not help to erect the prejudiced expectations of the ordinary reader into rules based on Austin's ideas of illocutionary acts, as Richard Ohmann attempted (and as I discussed on p. 126). The glorification of the illusion-making of the reader simply does not entail that narrative confusion and lack of closure are necessarily breaches of the narrative "contract" – to Kermode this non-linearity is actually an indispensable feature of narrative.

Kermode is important because despite his strong focus on the ending, he does not presuppose a linear narrative and a "closed" interpretation. The recursive method of Kermode (and Brooks) leaves open at least the reader's game of interpretation: "whatever the constraints of a particular culture or a particular period, plurality is in the nature of narrativity"[404]. Kermode is therefore able to situate the polysemantic nature of the text within the author's illusion-making act. Yet, Kermode's approach is unmistakably "Anglo-American" in its core when it comes to the directed nature of the narrative: the narrative may be plural and it may be non-linear, but it is bound for resolution and progresses accordingly.

The French stance that I have attempted to schematize is much more radical because it thwarts the possibility of resolution. We here remember that Aragon mentions that "un sentier

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[402] Ibid., 117.

[403] Ibid., 120.

[404] Ibid., 119. Barthes by contrast often seems deliberately to limit recursiveness by going left to right in his analyses.

n'a pas de fin"[405]. Another example which also uses the metaphor of the path is due to the novelist Claude Simon, who in his Nobel speech explains the nature of the modern novel:

> [T]he path then followed will be very different from that of the novelist who, starting out from a "beginning", reaches an "ending". This other way, which it costs an explorer of an unknown country such pains to find (losing himself, retracing his steps, guided or led astray by resemblances between different places, the same place's different aspects) will constantly call for rechecks, pass across crossroads already crossed.[406]

The striking thing is that Simon's explorer does not have an endpoint in mind whatsoever: "this journey's end may well be that he comes back to his point of departure". According to this view, the literary text is in a semantic flux, in an inherent interpretative instability, as well exemplified by Paul Claudel's important poetics: "Aucune chose n'a été créée une fois pour toutes; elle n'est point arrêtée; elle continue à être produite, elle exprime un état de tension permanent de l'effort dont elle est l'acte"[407].

With this semantic non-linearity, it becomes very difficult, if not impossible, for two different readers to interact with literature in the same fashion. Yet, even Derrida is willing to admit that a certain level of linearity is a necessary characteristic of literature: "La fin de l'écriture linéaire est bien la fin du livre"[408]. Nevertheless, the communicative model of literature is difficult to establish if the interpretive structure is in a constant flux. This stance which is typical of French criticism is further strengthened by the last decades of experimental, formal

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[405] Aragon, *Les incipit*: 90.

[406] Simon, "Discours à Stockholm".

[407] Paul Claudel: *Art Poétique*, quoted by Poulet, *Le point de départ*: 29.

[408] Jacques Derrida, *De la grammatologie* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1967). 129.

openings by authors such as Perec, Bénabou, Ndiaye, Toussaint, Navarre, Lewino, Chevillard, Carrère, Renaud Camus, Baudouin, Claude Simon and Volodine.

A Final Word about Conventions and the Cooperative Literature

It is no coincidence that these experimental openings and the critics' non-linear approach to textual interpretation fall within the same period as the emergence of computer-inspired or even computer-generated literature. With hyperlinks and interaction the computer-inspired literature highlights the reader's various routes through the text. Inspired by Valéry's "La Marquise sortit à cinq heures", the experimental writer John Barth has precisely called this phenomenon the "Marquise in the Machine"[409]. With an interactive text, the opening may not be predictable, yet this is no guarantee that the text will move beyond the clichéd openings mocked by Valéry.

This computer-inspired or computer-assisted literature does however exemplify that the importance of narrativity in the last 50 years has changed and that it becomes more and more challenging to maintain the illusion-making of traditional literature. The critic's challenge is therefore that conventions of reading seem to have compartmentalized into group-based or even individual "conventions" that make it hard to establish a common ground of interpretation or interaction. In literature as well as more generally speaking, we could say, as does Porter Abbott, that we are "becoming, culturally, even globally, more participatory, less keenly focused on the end of the story"[410].

On the basis of this shift in the openings, the question is to which degree it makes at all sense to establish a generalized communicative model for literature. However, by pointing to the

[409] Barth, "Click."

[410] Abbott, "The Future of All Future Narratives," 531.

cooperative principle, which I introduced in chapter 2, I argue that the cooperative principle has merely changed its focus. The change in how this principle is applied concerns the areas that I discussed at length in my second, third and fourth chapter, namely the emergence of what I have called "perspectival abruptness" (chapter 2) as well as the emergence of a high level of consciousness concerning the text's intertextuality (chapter 3 and 4). As I illustrated in chapter 4 on Valéry and the Marquise, intertextuality becomes merely a set of conventions that needs to be respected in order for the literary exchange between the author and the reader to be successful.

Literary openings are an effective tool for registering these historical shifts in both the formal characteristics of literature of a particular period and the critics' ideological efforts of interpretation. This is why we need our sense of a beginning.

– APPENDIX –

Approaching the Text:

A Criticism of Openings

As my first chapter showed, people have always thought about beginnings, and cosmologies have never failed to approach concepts like 'origin', 'conception', and 'end'. Considering the obvious parallels between such cosmological concepts and the ones used to describe literary creation, I was – at the outset of this dissertation – surprised to discover that literary critics generally do not seem to concern themselves much with beginnings. In 1980, Victor Brombert signaled that the field "still remains uncharted territory" and, overall, this assessment holds true today[411]. Critical texts on literary openings have indeed appeared fairly regularly since 1965, but always as rather isolated and singular contributions to the discipline, for instance, when elucidating a particular text or a certain author's methods. Only rarely have texts on openings entered into dialogue with each other: they have not established their own discursive space in criticism, at least not in the English-speaking world. When we think of the importance of the concept of intertextuality, which so easily lends itself to openings, and which precisely makes way for "dialogue" amongst texts, it becomes even more striking.

My dissertation is thus far from being the first critical text ever to discuss the literary opening. Yet, it has claimed to be the first work in English that aims at a comprehensive

[411] Brombert, "Opening Signals in Narrative," 493.

understanding of the literary opening as a tool for criticism[412]. Given this comprehensive approach, it is beneficial to include a survey of how critics until now have worked on openings, thereby attempting to situate these previous approaches in an overall critical narrative. This appendix will provide this survey, thereby supporting the previous chapters. The foremost purpose of the survey is to help and encourage the intellectual navigation in the slowly growing collection of critical texts on the topic. In the process, however, I shall demonstrate that ordering, categorizing and synthesizing these various approaches will enable us to arrive at a workable and dynamic concept of the literary opening. In other words, I shall attempt to establish a discursive space for these critical texts; to jump to a metacritical level where these texts start interacting.

Such a metacritical survey has the advantage of revealing particular preoccupations amongst critics in different periods, expounding on their various ideas about how we approach – or should approach – literary texts. My approach is to portray the literary opening in the critical chronology and in as systematic a fashion as possible without, however, pretending that there could be one universal approach. Rather, I shall show how the use of the opening varies according to the critical priorities of the period. By getting these priorities to enter into a dialogue with each other by focusing on one single formal unit such as the beginning, I will pursue one way effectively to elucidate the bends in literary criticism's itinerary across movements and languages. This will further serve to illustrate what my previous chapters have already argued: that the approach to the opening reflects the general approach to literature.

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[412] Some dissertations have used openings, e.g., of a particular author as the dissertation's guiding principle, but the insight to be gained is on the side of the author, not on openings themselves. Nancy Ezer, "The Opening as a Master-Narrative of the Political Unconscious" (Villanova University, 1988); Mary Isobel Rosner, "Novel Beginnings. A Rhetorical Analysis of Ouvertures in Nineteenth-Century Fiction" (Ohio State Univ., 1978).

At the end of this chronological itinerary, I intend to have illustrated further that the study of the literary opening illuminates a great divide between the Anglo-American and the French (as well as the German approach) to the text. As I have already argued in previous chapters, the opening has been neglected amongst critics in the Anglo-American critical tradition and this will be further substantiated in this chapter. Although one may suspect that this asymmetry between the critical traditions is to be found in French criticism's stronger preoccupation with the formal aspects of literature, I here argue that the difference in the approach to the beginning extends beyond simply the question of formal priorities. The difference in the approach to the opening points to a difference in the approach to the literary text as a whole; I will thus demonstrate that literary texts occupy an altogether different function in the Anglo-American literary tradition.

In this appendix I will make reference to some texts which have already been discussed in previous chapters, but the idea is to place these texts within a different perspective; that of elucidating the chronology of the criticism of openings. In other words, some references will be repeated from previous chapters, but the purpose of this is to assemble a comprehensive guide to the critical field on the topic, and also to look at these references within a new setting.

For the sake of comprehensiveness and chronology let us begin by going all the way back to the Greeks, because here as many other areas, the main schism is already brought out. In other words, I begin – quite appropriately – at the beginning.

GREEK REASON AND NATURAL BEGINNINGS

Since the professional literary critic is a modern invention, a historical survey of critical texts on openings can be made very quickly indeed. Criticism, however, obviously did exist, but

generally in the form of either philosophers' aesthetic ontologies or authors' reflections on the creative process.

As I discussed in chapter 1, Greek reason since Hesiod views narratives – typically epics and tragedies – as being committed to begin "at the beginning". The "logos" that we have come to know as the Greek sense of rationality also refers to a presupposition of a certain direction in a narrative. As Brague points out: "Ce que nous appelons un peu paresseusement la 'raison grecque' est d'abord le fait de raconter ce qui s'est passé, et de le faire d'une certaine façon"[413]. Using the *logos* and speaking "straight" involves the speaker's commitment to telling how the 'whole thing' started. To Hesiod, it is only by beginning at the beginning that a speaker will be able to summarize what happened in a way that will present the chain of events in its various dimensions without leading the speaker astray. Yet, it is only when deciding not to hide or distort anything that a speaker will be able to set out from the affair itself and avoid obfuscating the narrative by beginning by his or her own perspective. In other words, to speak in public involves explaining how the current situation *came about*: the current state will need to be presented in the light of its "natural" beginning[414].

Hesiod's line continues through Aristotle's celebrated thoughts on the structure of tragedy. Having described "a whole" as "that which has a beginning, a middle and a conclusion"[415], the *Poetics* defines a beginning as "that which itself does not of necessity follow something else, but after which there naturally is, or comes into being, something else". In other words, the beginning cannot be deduced from what preceded it. The middle and the conclusion, however, should follow from the beginning, and nothing else should follow the conclusion.

[413] Brague, "Le récit du commencement. Une aporie de la raison grecque," 23.

[414] Hesiod, "The Theogony," vv. 156, 203, 408, 25, 52.

[415] Aristotle, "Poetics," 96.

These logical boundaries of the artwork establish a "cosmological" parallel that renders mimetic representation possible. A plot must therefore not begin "from a random point" – the beginning ought to be 'natural', as I discussed in chapter 1. Aristotle's ultimate interest, however, lies in the *telos*, in the "final cause" and its means of persuasion as effected through emotion, style as well as through argumentation. The *logos* serves the artwork's resolution: "the end is most important of all".

Yet, the Greeks themselves were aware that the commitment to "natural" beginning, despite its commonsensical appeal, contains a logical obstacle. Going back to a state of affairs prior to the present involves logically restoring things as they physically were. This exercise is not easy – and for two reasons: first, it would practically require the speaker to relinquish his or her present perspective. Yet, it is only when keeping the present perspective he or she will be able to focus on the direction and move through the sequence of events as they happened. Second, when locating a beginning one could theoretically extend the search infinitely backwards. The storm over the Alps could eventually be explained by a butterfly flying in China. But we could then start telling the life story of this butterfly, and so on. A "natural" beginning is in fact not very "natural": as I have already argued in chapter 1, it must rely on a pragmatic decision about where to begin.

This holds true of even the most "natural" of beginnings: birth. Texts that have tried to trace origins by describing the protagonist's birth immediately emanate artificiality. The implausibility of the perspective is illustrated much later in history when David Copperfield begins his narrative by announcing: "I am born". Yet, once this search is started, one ought to extend back still further and describe the moment of one's *conception* – as does famously

Tristram Shandy. Although philosophers recommend providing "natural" beginnings, literature has profound difficulties in complying with this. That was the lesson of my first chapter.

It is therefore symptomatic that the oldest example of a critical assessment of a specific literary opening addresses precisely this problem of "natural" beginnings. In his *Ars Poetica*, Horace extends back before high-Greek reasoning and eulogizes Homer for opening *in medias res* with "Sing, goddess, of the Wrath…". What makes Homer the greatest of poets in Horace's eyes is precisely that: "he doesn't (…) begin the Trojan war from the twin egg [that is, of the twins Clytemnestra and Helen]"[416]. Inception is not conception, is the lesson. And an opening is not a beginning. Instead, the midway becomes the measure for the whole work: the poet "tells his fables and mixes truth with falsehoods in such a way that the middle squares with the beginning and the end with the middle".

PRE-MODERN CREATION AND THE INCIPIT

Generally, and perhaps not surprisingly, Horace's lesson has been honored more by literary craftsmen than by theorists. Dante Alighieri famously begins his *Divine Comedy* by "Nel Mezzo del Cammin…"[417]. The narrative begins precisely at the halfway mark of the character Dante's life, with nothing but allusions to what came before, to what led the protagonist astray and into the journey of the fiction. This principle is echoed by Pierre de Ronsard in his *Brief on the Art of French Poetry* (1565), where he asserts that "great poems never begin at the first of the action"[418]. He consequently gives the following piece of advice to poets: "Begin in the middle" ,

[416] Horace, "Ars Poetica," 127.

[417] Dante, *Inferno*.

[418] Ronsard, "From A Brief on the Art of French Poetry."

allowing only one exception: lyrical odes may begin "abruptly". In other words, the principle of the midway opening signifies not abruptness, but, on the contrary, poetic harmony.

In the medieval period in general, the incipit is an important marker of the poem and is used centrally to classify poems, as a sort of catalogue in honor of God[419]. An important incipit of the period is: "Je a cest mien commencement", which exploits precisely the literary parallel to cosmology to the fullest[420].

The very first 'stylistic' analysis of an opening appears in 1612 by the German cabalistic mystic Jacob Böhme, whom I also discussed in Chapter 1. In his work by the regenerative title of *Aurora*, Böhme sketches the power of the combinational cabala[421]. An entire section is devoted to "an exposition of the first verse of the first chapter of Genesis, according to the language of Nature" and consists in a peculiar, 'semantic' analysis of the phonetics of the words of the Genesis. The analysis is based simply on the German Bible, and apparently it does not appear to be of Böhme's concern that these "words of God" sound different in their "original" Hebrew/Greek form. This cabbalistic approach is to return later, as structuralism of the 20th century shares some important features with cabbalism, as has been pointed out by Harold Bloom, one the central theorists of influence of the 20th century.

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[419] See Smith, *The Book of the Incipit*.

[420] Arthur Långfors, *Les incipit des poèmes français antérieurs au XVIe siècle : Répertoire bibliographique* (Genève: Slatkine Reprints, 1977). 175.

[421] Böhme, *The Aurora*.

1850-1920: MODERN PROVOCATION AND THE POTENTIAL OF BEGINNINGS

As previous chapters have revealed, modern literature tends to interrogate norms such as the conventional identification of reader and writer in the literary activity. The increasingly provocative mode of literary poetics results from this loosening link between reader and writer, as Siegfried Jüttner puts it: "Die Autoren fühlen sich frei von persönlichen Bindungen an den Leser, den sie gar nicht kennen, und leugnen die Verbindlichkeit tradierer Normen"[422]. For many modern authors, tradition becomes a target and the method consists in making the reader react.

Openings illustrate quite well this change in the literary perception. From the mid-19th century, the descriptions of openings sometimes turn playful and somewhat "provocative". In his seminal text on the opening line as the very generative principle of his novels, Aragon explains: "j'avais considéré le XIXe siècle comme celui de la rupture avec la tradition"[423].

Aragon points to Gobineau's *Scaramouche* from 1843, which opens by suggesting different clichéd openings in order only to express to the reader an exasperation with the vulgarity of the beginning: "Ma foi, non ! tous ces débuts, étant vulgaires, sont ennuyeux et, puisque je n'ai pas assez d'imagination pour te jeter sur la scène de mon récit d'une manière un peu neuve, j'aime mieux ne pas commencer du tout […]". In this refusal to begin, Aragon locates the new attitude to literary convention: "Ainsi, le jeune Gobineau […] manifeste l'inquiétude qui s'empare nécessairement de l'écrivain devant le caractère conventionnel que semble nécessairement prendre l'amorce, l'incipit de tout écrit, toute phrase d'initiation à la cérémonie mentale, conte ou roman, qui va constituer le récit entrepris"[424].

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[422] Jüttner, "RF," 95.

[423] Aragon, *Les incipit*: 37.

[424] Ibid., 75.

Almost simultaneously with Gobineau, Edgar Allen Poe protests (in 1846) against the literary tradition's tight focus on the *dénouement*[425]. In his provocative explanation of the creative process underlying his most famous poem, Poe announces the raven's rather unmotivated repetition of "nevermore" as the pivot of the poem. In this seemingly intentionless refrain "the poem may be said to have its beginning – at the end, where all works of art should begin". Behind Poe's irony and willingness to astound, however, we apprehend that the author and his reader are likely to embark on exact opposite routes in order to get to the artwork. This is an insight obviously at play in Poe's other artistic production where suspense remains a central component in the crime narrative.

This frustration with a conventional opening is partly a product of the modern era's shift in genre from recital to *récit*. In the 19th century the novel gradually comes to dominate the literary scene, both commercially and creatively, which threatens the work with banality as the novelistic opening becomes increasingly institutionalized. The 19th century openings are recognizable and classifiable according to the individual author: "Je m'étais mis à redécouvrir sous la diversité apparente des incipit du roman romantique une simple uniformité, celle de l'homme, l'auteur. Il y avait les manières de Balzac, celles de Hugo, celles de Flaubert … voilà tout"[426].

The post-realist authors therefore increasingly find that the opening constrains the author's creative possibilities as well as the plausibility of the story. As we move into the 20th century, writers have pointed out the impossibility for the narrator to comprehend the entire

[425] Poe, "The Philosophy of Composition," 746-47.

[426] Aragon, *Les incipit*: 37.

story[427], and the way of beginning therefore becomes essential. Proust's narrator does not pretend to perceive the entire *Recherche*; on the contrary, the opening of the novel reveals a dynamics between the narrator's two first persons – a dynamics between 'référent' and 'référé' – without which the work could not even have been generated . As Fontane explains in 1880, the opening page becomes a key to the work that will unfold in the light of it: "The first chapter is always the key thing and in the first chapter it is the first page. [...] With the right structure the germ of the whole thing must be present in the first page"[428].

In the 1920's a polemic crusade against the banality of the novel takes shape in France precisely through a reflection on the novelistic opening. In Chapter 4 of this dissertation I pursued the peculiar united front of Paul Valéry and André Breton, which summed up their discontent with the novel through a mockery of the sentence "La Marquise sortit à cinq heures". With the surrealist 'phrase de réveil' and Valéry's impatience, it became a defined artistic challenge to begin.

The rise of academic criticism at the beginning of the century actually did not spur any considerable debate specific to literary openings. It is remarkable that comments on openings came exclusively from the authors themselves. There is one exception, however: a critical work devoted exclusively to openings in German literature did appear as early as 1913 in a doctoral dissertation at the University of Gießen[429]. This work, which I have not, however, been able to retrieve in any library, is really the first critical work on the topic. The war, however, seemed to impede critics' interest in formal measures and no work on the topic should appear in 45 years.

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[427] Nuttall, *Openings*: 194.

[428] Theodor Fontane, 18 August 1880, cited in Hertling, *Theodor Fontanes Irrungen, Wirrungen, Die 'Erste Seite' als Schlüssel zum Werk*: 7. My translation.

[429] Fritz, "Erzähleingänge in der deutschen Literatur" (Gießen, 1913).

1960'S: THE BEGINNINGS OF CRITICISM OF OPENINGS

In 1958, however, the young American critic Hillis Miller wrote a chapter based on the opening of Charles Dickens' *Bleak House*[430]. In 1960, the study of the opening turned to stylistics with Ian Watt's article on the first paragraph of Henry James' *The Ambassadors*[431]. Watt here managed to exhibit the narrative strategies of James through a close look at the descriptive density and grammatical repetitiveness of James' late prose. Watt's article was later translated into French and appeared in the central French journal *Poétique*, to which I shall return below. Later, in 1967 and 1974, Frank Kermode was to publish his two important contributions to the topic, his *The Sense of an Ending* and his related article[432]. Yet, as I have already argued in chapter 3, the preoccupation is fundamentally different from that of the German and the French critics during the same period.

Again German critics set a couple of records. The first article on the literary openings as a general poetic consideration appeared in 1961 when Piwitt published his article "Zum Problem des Romaneingangs"[433]. And the first critical collection on openings appeared in 1965[434]. Despite the subtitle of this collection – "Attempt at a Poetics of Novels" – the ideas presented here did not amount to a systematic approach: "In any case a systematic exposition could not and should not emerge from this, as this would at the current state of research only lead to a barren

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[430] Miller, "Chapter VI: Bleak House."

[431] Ian Watt, "The First Paragraph of the Ambassadors: An Explication," in *Henry James: The Ambassadors* (NYC: Norton, 1994).

[432] Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending*; Frank Kermode, "Sensing Endings," *Nineteenth-Century Fiction: Narrative Endings* 33, no. 1 (1978).

[433] Hermann Peter Piwitt, "Zum Problem des Romaneingangs," *Akzente* 8(1961).

[434] Norbert Miller, *Romananfänge. Versuch zu einer Poetik des Romans* (Berlin: Literarisches Colloquium, 1965).

and irrelevant schematism "[435]. Just as the literary discipline started using methodic tools often borrowed from linguistics, time worked against the idea of developing a system: "It seems today that even if you cannot do away with systems altogether then at least you do not entirely rely upon them any longer"[436]. Yet, the collection contains important suggestions for the study of the opening, for instance, by being the first to propose that the opening may reveal central historical shifts in the creative imagination[437].

In French literature of the 1960's, a group of authors with keen critical sensibility pursues the potentiality of the literary opening in their ambition to renew the novelistic genre. In 1961, Alain Robbe-Grillet toys with the idea of a novel that from after its conception becomes self-generative[438]. In chapter 4, I discuss how Claude Mauriac uses Paul Valéry's mockery of the novel in the very title of his novel, *La Marquise sortit à cinq heures*. These novelists' primary target is the conventional novel's artificial concordance between historical time and story time. Raymond Jean efficiently summed up the French *nouveau roman* thus: "Tout se passe presque toujours comme si la coupure, la rupture initiale du récit indiquait que ce récit avait déjà commencé ailleurs et prenait le relais d'un (du) texte antérieur plutôt que celui d'une réalité référentielle préexistentielle à l'œuvre"[439].

These reflections amongst authors are closely related to the naissant structuralism, which was to predominate in the 1970's.

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[435] Ibid., 7-8. My translation.

[436] Ibid. My translation

[437] See in particular Klotz' article, which pursues the disappearance of the muse from the epic with the consequence that the beginning itself becomes increasingly thematized. Volker Klotz, "Muse und Helios - Über epische Anfangsnöte und -weise," in *Romananfänge. Versuch Zu Einer Poetik Des Romans*, ed. Norbert Miller (Berlin: Literarisches Colloquium, 1965).

[438] Robbe-Grillet, "Un roman qui s'invente lui-même."

[439] Raymond Jean, "Ouvertures, Phrases-Seuils," *Critique* XXVII, no. 288 (1971): 431.

1970'S: FRENCH STRUCTURALISM AND THE OPEN POETICS

Right from the beginning of the 1970's, the French journal *Poétique* was instrumental in putting literary openings on the critical agenda in France. Ian Watt's article in English and Weinrich's article in German were translated and published in *Poétique* and a number of critics published through this organ as well as the *Poétique* bookseries at Seuil during the 1970's and 1980's. We see important contributions by prominent theorists such as Barthes, Kristeva, Genette, Hamon as well as specialized contributions from Lancereux, Uspenski, Dubois, Cohn, Morhange and Rabau[440]. The journal's special relation to openings is preserved all the way up to our contemporary period, where the most influential theorist of openings, Andrea Del Lungo, published his initial article in *Poétique* and later published his book at the same publishing house, Minuit[441].

The "openness" of the opening was an obvious tool for structuralism, which defined itself as a "science du pluriel", which took the side of the writing rather than the reading, as I explained in chapter 3. Realism was often the target of structuralism, which accused realism of being "pseudo-realist" by its concrete references to time and space. Inspired by linguistic tools, the approach was to focus on the creation of meaning instead. Unsurprisingly, linguists are instrumental in remaining a tight focus on openings, all the way from Tynjanov and Jakobson to

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[440] Barthes, "Par où commencer ?."; Philippe Hamon, "Clausules," *Poétique* 24(1975); Philippe Hamon, "Texte littéraire et métalangage," *Poétique* 31(1977); Dorrit Cohn, "K fait son entrée au Château: A propos du changement d'instance narrative dans le manuscrit de Kafka," *Poétique* 61(1985); Gérard Genette, "Le statut pragmatique de la fiction narrative," *Poétique* 78(1989); Kristeva, "Le Texte clos."; Dominique Lanceraux, "Modalités de la narration dans 'La Route des Flandres'," *Poétique* 14(1973); Boris Uspenski, "Poétique de la composition," *Poétique* 9(1972); Jacques Dubois, "Surcodage et protocole de lecture dans le roman naturaliste," *Poétique* 16(1973); J.-L. Morhange, "Incipit narratifs. L'entrée du lecteur dans l'univers de la fiction," *Poétique* (1995); Sophie Rabau, "La première phrase du premier roman," *Poétique* 82(1990).

[441] Andrea del Lungo, "Pour une poétique de l'incipit," *Poétique* 94(1993); del Lungo, *L'Incipit romanesque*.

Backus in 1965, Banfield (1987), Carter (1987), Vogeleer (1987), Duchan (1995), and Philippe (1998)[442].

In the midst of this formalistic period of the 1970's, several of the French critics turned the formal concern into societal critique, such as Kristeva and Duchet[443].

1970'S: STRUCTURALISM À L'AMÉRICAINE

It is in many ways striking that, in spite of their method of close reading, the American New Critics never seemed particularly interested in openings. The opening did not have a special status as being particularly pertinent to their method. The reason may be that American New Criticism sees the work of art as an autonomous object, as I argue on page 155. Consequently, criticism on openings in the English-speaking world is pretty much non-existent until the winds of structuralism blew across the Atlantic. The only mention up until the 1970's is thus Hillis Miller and Ian Watt's above-mentioned articles, and it should be noted that Hillis Miller was methodologically strongly inspired by Georges Poulet and the so-called Geneva-School, so the English-speaking criticism is strictly speaking only represented by Ian Watt's article.

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[442] Tynjanov, "On Literary Evolution."; Roman Jakobson and Jurij Tynjanov, "Problems in the Study of Literature and Language," in *Readings in Russian Poetics: Formalist and Structuralist Views*, ed. Ladislav Matejka and Krystyna Pomorska (Ann Arbor: Michigan Slavic Publications, 1978 [1928]); Backus, ""He came into her line of vision walking backward": Nonsequential Sequence-signals in Short Story Openings."; Ann Banfield, ""Describing the unobserved": Events Grouped an Empty Center," in *The Linguistics of Writing - Arguments between Language and Literature*, ed. Nagal Fabb, et al. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987); Ronald Carter, "The Placing of Names: Sequencing in Narrative Openings," *Leeds Studies in English* 18(1987); Svetlana Vogeleer, "Le concept de point de vue et son application aux phrases existentielles qui ouvrent un texte narratif," *Le Langage et l'homme* XXII, no. 1 (1987); J. F. Duchan, G. A. Bruder, and L. E. Hewitt, *Deixis in Narrative - A cognitive Science Perspective* (Hillsdale NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Inc., 1995); Philippe, "Les démonstratifs et le statut énonciatif des textes de fiction : L'exemple des ouvertures de roman."

[443] Duchet, "Pour un sociocritique, ou variation sur un incipit."; Claude Duchet, "Idéologie de la mise en texte [Premières phrases des "Rougon-Macquart"]," *La Pensée* 215(1980).

Structuralism did change this and the topic of openings begins to be discussed throughout the 1970's. Edward Said's important book *Beginnings*, which I discussed in chapter 3, appears in 1975, but we also see contributions from Philip Stevick (1970), W. R. Martin (1973), Jonathan Culler (1975, 1976, 1980), Seymour Chatman (1975), James Bennett (1976), Steven Kellman (1977), Meir Sternberg (1978), Victor Brombert (1980) and Thomas Docherty (1983)[444]. What is common to all these critics is that they are all inspired by French criticism and French methodology.

1970'S: AMERICAN ENDINGS

As I have discussed in my chapter 3, the focus in English-speaking criticism is rather on the ending. The two most eminent examples are Frank Kermode's *The Sense of an Ending* and Peter Brooks: *Reading for the Plot*, which I discussed at greater length in my chapter 3, but the same period brings important contributions on endings by David Richter (1974), Marianna Torgovnick (1981), Neil Hertz (1985), D.A. Miller (1981), Joyce Rowe (1988), Barbara Smith (1968), and Alexander Welsh (1978)[445].

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[444] Philip Stevick, "Beginnings," in *The Chapter in Fiction: Theories of Narrative Division* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1970); W. R. Martin, "Beginnings and Endings in Conrad," *Conradiana* 5, no. 1 (1973); Jonathan Culler, "Defining Narrative Units," in *Style and Structure in Literature: Essays in the New Stylistics*, ed. Roger Fowler (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1975); Culler, "Presupposition and Intertextuality."; Jonathan Culler, "Prolegomena to a Theory of Reading," in *The Reader in the Text: Essays on Audience and Interpretation*, ed. Susan R. Suleiman and Inge Crosman (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980); Chatman, "Towards a Theory of Narrative."; James R. Bennett, "Beginning and Ending. A Bibliography," *Style* 10(1976); Kellman, "Grand Openings and Plain: The Poetics of First Lines."; Sternberg, *Expositional Modes and Temporal Ordering in Fiction*; Brombert, "Opening Signals in Narrative."; Docherty, "From Ends to Beginnings: Time and the Plot."

[445] Richter, Fable's End: Completeness and Closure in Rhetorical Fiction; Torgovnick, Closure in the Novel; Neil Hertz, The end of the line : essays on psychoanalysis and the sublime (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985); Miller, Narrative and its Discontents; Joyce A. Rowe, Equivocal Endings in Classic American Novels (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1988); Barbara H Smith, Poetic Closure (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1968); Alexander Welsh, "Opening and Closing Les Misérables," in Narrative Endings (Berkeley CA: 1978).

1980'S: THE BREAKTHROUGH OF NARRATOLOGY

In the 1970's there was an obvious schism between "mainstream" critics, who worked with endings and structuralist critics (before these in turn became "mainstream") who worked with beginnings. This schism tends to dissolve in the 1980's where the discipline of narratology seems to gather momentum and picks up on the usefulness of discussing openings. Narratology is more internationally well-founded than any of the previous literary methodologies and we see a broad group of scholars interested in openings, from Gérard Genette to Stanzel to Lintvelt (1984), Springer (1987), Ferris (1988) and Driehorst (1988)[446]. This interest remains fairly constantly strong throughout the subsequent decades all the way up to the anthology *Narrative Beginnings*, edited by Brian Richardson, and to which I contributed an essay[447].

1990'S: GENETIC STUDIES AND THE FRAGILE OPENING

In the 1990's, the literary methodology (generally as well as specifically in the case of openings) splits up more equally where several "schools" or "orientations" co-exist side by side. In terms of openings, the fragility of opening becomes an object of study for poetic and genetic studies, notably in the French tradition where the opening becomes a point of fixture almost regardless of the predominant theoretical orientation of the time. This period brings poetic and genetic studies

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[446] Stanzel, *A Theory of Narrative*; Jaap Lintvelt, "L'ouverture du roman: procédures d'analyse," in *Recherches sur le roman II 1950-1970: Cahiers de recherche des instituts néerlandais*, ed. Charles Grivel and Frans Rutten (1984); Norman Springer, "The Language of Literary Openings: Hemingway's *Cat in the Rain*," in *Narrative Poetics: Innovations, Limits, Challenges*, ed. James Phelan (Columbus: Center for Comparative Studies in the Humanities, 1987); Ina Ferris, "The Historical Novel and the Problem of Beginning: The Model of Scott," *Journal of Narrative Technique* 18, no. 1 (1988); Gerd Driehorst and Katharina Schlicht, "Textuale Grenzsignale in narrativer Sicht. Zum Problem von Texteingang und Textausgang. Forschungsstand und Perspektiven," in *Sprache in Vergangenheit und Gegenwart*, ed. Wolfgang Brandt (Marburg: Beiträge aus dem Institut für Germanistische Sprachwissenschaft der Philipps-Universität Marburg, 1988).

[447] Richardson, *Narrative Beginnings*.

based on openings by Morhange (1995), Del Lungo (1993), Ferrer (1993), Chevillot (1993) and Umberto Eco (1994), who uses it to discuss the concept of fictionality[448].

1990'S: OPENINGS AND THE INSIGHT INTO HISTORY

A different trend within the 1990's brings openings into the critic's attention as a tool for unraveling variations in historical periods, that is, as a tool for insight into history. This approach was started earlier by Norbert Miller (1968) and Klotz (1965) and peaked around 1990 with the works of Nuttall (1991 and 1992), Brague (1987), Dunn and Cole (1992), Mandelartz (1993) and Rodriguez (1990)[449]. The weight is again on the German and French critics, except for Nuttall, whom I already discussed in my chapter 1, who also uses openings as insights into historical variations in metaphysics. The shared belief in these critical works is that, as Rodriguez puts it, it is possible to establish "Une topique de début universelle, ou bien commune à une époque". As I have tried to describe in my chapter 3, such an approach would, however, need a very well-described linguistic focus if it is not to turn into generalizations.

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[448] Morhange, "Incipit narratifs. L'entrée du lecteur dans l'univers de la fiction."; del Lungo, "Pour une poétique de l'incipit."; Daniel Ferrer and Bernhild Boie, eds., *Genèse du roman contemporain. Incipit et entrée en écriture* (Paris: CNRS Editions, 1993); Chevillot, *La réouverture du texte. Balzac, Beckett, Robbe-Grillet, Roussel, Aragon, Calvino, Bénabou, Hébert*; Eco, "Fictional Protocols."

[449] Norbert Miller, *Der empfindsame Erzähler. Untersuchungen an Romananfängen des 18. Jahrhunderts* (München: Hanser, 1968); Klotz, "Muse und Helios - Über epische Anfangsnöte und -weise."; Anthony David Nuttall, "Some Shakespearean Openings: Hamlet, Twelfth Night, The Tempest," in *The Arts of Performance in Elizabethan and Early Stuart Drama: Essays for G. K. Hunter*, ed. Biggs-Murray et al. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 1991); Nuttall, *Openings*; Brague, "Le récit du commencement. Une aporie de la raison grecque."; Francis M. Dunn and Thomas Cole, "Beginnings in Classical Literature," *Yale Classical Studies* 29(1992); Michael Mandelartz, "Der Textanfang als kosmologischer Entwurf: die Motive des Musenanrufs und des Waldes," *Euphorion* 87(1993); Pierre Rodriguez and Michele Weil, eds., *Topique des ouvertures narratives avant 1800* (Montpellier: Centre d'Étude du Dix-Huitième Siècle de Montpellier, Univ. Paul Valery Montpellier, 1990).

Within this trend there is an increasing interest in what I call "generic" beginnings, represented by such critics as Rabau (1990), Bessière (2001), Kreuzer (1993) and Haubrichs (1995)[450]. These critics use openings as units that define the literary genres and the inauguration of a particular genre. Again French and German critics predominate, but the English-speaking criticism is here importantly represented by Sheldon Sacks, who may have been the first American critic to acknowledge the signals of literary openings by talking about tragedy in terms of sequence. Through this analysis he can reveal that the modern tragedy *begins* with the tragedy, making it more a blunder (Lord Jim, Tess) from which one needs to fight back rather than being an inevitable endpoint of the story as in Greek tragedy[451].

1990'S: DIVERSION WITH OPENINGS: PEDAGOGY AND MEMORIZATION

A third trend within the 1990's is the more informal use of openings as a tool for teaching and canonization of novels. For instance, Verrier (1992) and Sabbah (1991) use openings as a pedagogical tool for introducing literary considerations to a high-school audience[452]. Simon Leys (2001) and Amos Oz (1999) use openings as an ordering principle within their own poetics[453].

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[450] Jean Bessière, ed. *Commencements du roman: Conférences du séminaire de Littérature comparée de l'Université de la Sorbonne Nouvelle* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2001); Rabau, "La première phrase du premier roman."; Helmut Kreuzer, "Anfänge des Romans," *LiLi - Zeitschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Linguistik* 23, no. 89 (1993); Wolfgang Haubrichs, ed., "Anfang und Ende," *LiLi - Zeitschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Linguistik* 25, no. 99 (1995).

[451] Sheldon Sacks, "Some Psychological Implications of Generic Distinctions," *Genre* 1(1968); Sheldon Sacks, "Golden Birds and Dying Generations," *Comparative Literature Studies* 6(1969); Sheldon Sacks, "Clarissa and the Tragic Traditions," in *Irrationalism in the eighteenth century*, ed. Harold E. Pagliaro (Cleveland: The Press of Case Western Reserve University, 1972).

[452] Jean Verrier, *Les débuts de romans* (Paris: Bertrand-Lacoste, 1992); Hélène Sabbah, *Les débuts de roman* (Paris: Hatier, 1991).

[453] Simon Leys, "Ouvertures," in *Protée et autres essais* (Paris: Gallimard, 2001); Amos Oz, *The Story Begins - Essays on Literature* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1999).

Moreover, openings begin to be classified, at least informally, by a variety of popular anthologies on openings, which serve further to canonize certain works[454]. It is also a period where the inception of the Internet increases the possibilities of this collective memorization of openings, which the anthologies started. In any case, a number of websites devoted to openings begin to appear within the later part of this decade. The German critic Bonheim also begins by a professional classification according to genres and distinguishes between openings: 1. with comment, 2. with description, 3. with report, 4. with speech[455].

Within this category falls also the use of openings as a tool in how to write. We thus see Friedrich Pfäfflin create a writing manual beginning with the title: "Das weiße Blatt oder Wie anfangen?" and Marge Piercy and Ira Wood also devote a prominent section of their writer's manual to the techniques of the novelistic opening[456].

2000'S: OPENINGS AND THE METAPHOR OF THE MILLENNIUM

It is characteristic throughout the critical tradition that whenever there is a symbolic use of beginnings there is also a stronger critical interest in the opening; as if they mutually justify or strengthen each other. We saw this in the works of Rabau and Dunn in whose works the

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[454] Donald Newlove, *First Paragraphs: Inspired Openings for Writers and Readers* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992); Bruce L. Weaver, *Novel openers: first sentences of 11,000 fictional works, topically arranged with subject, keyword, author, and title indexing* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co., 1995); Baird W. Whitlock, *From these Beginnings: Openings of Fifty Major Literary Works* (NYC: Schocken, 1985); Georgianne Ensign, *Great Beginnings and Endings: Opening and Closing Lines of Great Novels* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1996).

[455] Bonheim, "How Stories Begin: Devices of Exposition in 600 English, American, and Canadian Stories."

[456] Friedrich Pfäfflin, Ludwig Harig, and Schiller-Nationalmuseum., *Das weisse Blatt, oder, Wie anfangen?* , Vom Schreiben (Marbach am Neckar: Deutsche Schillergesellschaft, 1994); Piercy and Wood, *So You Want To Write: How to Master the Craft of Writing Fiction and the Personal Narrative*.

beginning at the symbolic level occupies a central ordering principle[457]. It is therefore hardly surprising that at the turn of the millennium, there was a further surge in critical texts that deliberately used the turn of the millennium as an ordering principle for the discussion of transitions, including literary beginnings. In this period we thus see the works of Louvel (1997), Retsch (2000), Vollman (2000), Bessière (2001), del Lungo (2003), Childs (2001), Leys (2001), Steiner (2001), and Henry (2002)[458]. Bessière, for instance, edited a whole anthology that appeared in 2001, and the period also includes a reprint of Kermode's *The Sense of an Ending*, which included a new epilogue that was written specifically at the occasion of the turn of the millennium[459]. Later appeared also the book edited by Brian Richardson to which I contributed an article with material that is included in chapter 1 of this dissertation[460]. Although the occasion of the millennium may seem arbitrary from a literary viewpoint, the volume of critical works on openings in the last 15 years has helped mature the field, especially with Andrea del Lungo's contribution, which condensed and systematised a lot of the Francophile preoccupation with openings since the emergence of the journal Poétique.

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[457] Rabau, "La première phrase du premier roman."; Dunn and Cole, "Beginnings in Classical Literature."

[458] Liliane Louvel, ed. *L'Incipit. Actes du colloque de Poitiers 29-30 mars 1996* (Poitiers: La Licorne, 1997); Annette Retsch, *Paratext und Textanfang* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2000); Rolf Vollman, "Was war am Anfang?," *Die Zeit* 2000; Bessière, *Commencements du roman: Conférences du séminaire de Littérature comparée de l'Université de la Sorbonne Nouvelle*; del Lungo, *L'Incipit romanesque*; Peter Childs, *Reading Fiction: Opening the Text* (Houndshills: Palgrave, 2001); Leys, "Ouvertures."; Steiner, *Grammars of Creation*; Henry, *Beginnings in French Literature*.

[459] Frank Kermode, *The sense of an ending : studies in the theory of fiction : with a new epilogue*, [New ed. (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

[460] Richardson, *Narrative Beginnings*.

2010'S: OPENINGS IN THE ERA OF COMPUTERS

In the period 1985-1995, it became very predominant by leading French writers to use highly formal openings. I am here thinking of such authors as Perec, Bénabou, Ndiaye, Toussaint, Navarre, Lewino, Chevillard, Carrère, Renaud Camus, Baudouin, Claude Simon and Volodine. These formal openings indicate the changing medium of literature in an age where the computer becomes an instrument that not only supports the creative act, but also interferes with the act and shapes it. The emergence in the past decade of computer-generated texts and the framework of the hypertext has only made the critical investigation into intertextuality and structural components more pertinent. It is the "Marquise in the Machine", as John Barth calls it[461].

STRUCTURING CRITICAL APPROACHES TO OPENINGS

What is evident from this *tour d'horizon* through the critical use of openings is that the critical approaches to openings are very varied. Yet it is possible to structure critics, as I have done above, into rough categories according to their methodologies and periods. Another way to classify the texts would be to classify them according to their object of analysis. According to this classification, I suggest the following categories, according to what the critic wishes to elucidate:

1. Author/oeuvre-approach (Examples are Füger, Hertling, Lascault, Müllenbrock, Zmegac, Hardy, Joly, W. R. Martin, Mazzoni[462])

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[461] See footnote 409.

[462] Wilhelm Füger, "Zur Kunst des Erzählanfangs bei Charles Dickens," in *Charles Dickens - Sein Werk in Lichte neuer deutscher Forschung*, ed. Heinz Reinhold (Heidelberg: Carl Winter Universitatsverlag, 1969); Hertling, *Theodor Fontanes Irrungen, Wirrungen, Die 'Erste Seite' als Schlüssel zum Werk*; Gilbert Lascault, "Commencements de Dumas," *L'Arc* 71(1978); Heinz-Joachim Müllenbrock, "Modes of Opening in the Work of E.

2. Single-text-approach (Examples are Cornille, Constantin, Dahan-Gaïda, Deurbergue, Duchet, Enders, Lascar, Terence Martin)[463]
3. Poetics-approach (Examples are Chevillot, Dubois, Erlebach, Hirdt, Jean, Harweg, Kellman, Keulen, Lecercle[464])
4. Movement/period-approach. (Examples are Norbert Miller and von Molnar[465])

M. Forster: A Contribution to the Poetics of his novels," *Modern Philology* 70, no. Feb (1973); Viktor Zmegac, "Zum Problem des Erzähleinsatzes bei Thomas Mann," *Filologija (Zagreb)* 4(1964); Barbara Hardy, "The Relationship of Beginning and End in George Eliot's Fiction," *Cahiers victoriens et édouardiens* 26(1987); Bernard Joly, "La première phrase dans les Contes et Nouvelles de Maupassant," *Cahiers naturalistes* 57(1983); Martin, "Beginnings and Endings in Conrad."; Christina Mazzoni, "(Re)constructing the incipit: Narrative Beginnings in Calvino and Freud," *Comparative Literature Studies* 30, no. 1 (1993).

[463] Jean-Louis Cornille, "Blanc, semblant et vraisemblance. Sur l'incipit de 'L'Étranger'," *Revue Romane*, 11(1976); Danielle Constantin, "'Le seul véritable problème est bien évidemment de commencer': Sur le travail prérédactionnel et l'entrée en écriture de *La Vie: Mode d'emploi* de Georges Perec," in *Beginnings in French Literature*, ed. Freeman G. Henry (Amsterdam/New York: 2002); Laurence Dahan-Gaïda, " 'D'où, chose remarquable, rien ne s'ensuit.': Un incipit sans qualités," in *L'Incipit. Actes du colloque de Poitiers 29-30 mars 1996*, ed. Liliane Louvel (Poitiers: La Licorne, 1997); Jean Deurbergue, "The Opening of Victory," *Cahiers d'Etudes et de Recherches Victoriennes et Edouardiennes* 2(1975); Duchet, "Pour un sociocritique, ou variation sur un incipit."; Horst Enders, "Der doppelte Beginn mit Hans Castorp: Zu Thomas Manns Der Zauberberg," in *Romananfänge. Versuch zu einer Poetik des Romans*, ed. Norbert Miller (Berlin: 1965); Alex Lascar, "Le début de la Maison du chat-qui-pelote: de la seconde ébauche à l'édition Furne," *L'Année balzacienne* 10(1989); Terence Martin, "Beginnings and Endings in the *Leatherstocking Tales*," in *Narrative Endings*, ed. Alexander Welsh (Berkeley CA: 1978).

[464] Peter Erlebach, Theorie und Praxis des Romaneingangs. Untersuchungen zur Poetik des Englischen Romans (Heidelberg: Carl Winter Universitätsverlag, 1990); Chevillot, La réouverture du texte. Balzac, Beckett, Robbe-Grillet, Roussel, Aragon, Calvino, Bénabou, Hébert; Dubois, "Surcodage et protocole de lecture dans le roman naturaliste."; Willi Hirdt, "Incipit. Zu einer Poetik des Romananfangs," Romanische Forschung LXXXVI(1974); Jean, "Ouvertures, Phrases-Seuils."; Raymond Jean, "Commencements romanesques," in Positions et oppositions sur le roman contemporain. Actes du colloque organisé par le centre de Philologie et littératures romanes de Strasbourg, avril 1970, ed. Michel Mansuy (Paris: Klincksieck, 1971); Harweg, Pronomina und Textkonstitution; Kellman, "Grand Openings and Plain: The Poetics of First Lines."; Maggi Keulen, "Where is here? or: The Importance of First Sentences in Novels," in Near Encounters: Festschrift for Richard Martin, ed. Hanjo Berressem and Bernd Herzogen-Rath (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1995); Jean-Jacques Lecercle, "Combien coûte le premier pas? Une théorie annonciative de l'incipit," in L'Incipit. Actes du colloque de Poitiers 29-30 mars 1996, ed. Liliane Louvel (Poitiers: La Licorne, 1997).

[465] Norbert Miller, "Die Rolle des Erzählers - Zum Problem des Romansanfangs im 18. Jahrhundert," in *Romananfänge. Versuch Zu Einer Poetik Des Romans*, ed. Norbert Miller (Berlin: Literarisches Colloquium, 1965); Geza von Molnar, "Iconic Closure and Narrative Opening in Lessing, Kant, Goethe, and Novalis," *Historical Reflections* 18, no. 3 (1992).

The advantage of structuring the critics according to their methodological approaches and periods rather than their object of study (author, single-text, poetics, period), as I have done, is that the historical shifts in orientations are highlighted across the national boundaries, which is the traditional focus of comparative literature.

The purpose of the exposition of critical approaches is also to show to what extent this dissertation rests upon quite a substantial amount of critical predecessors. This dissertation is obviously far from being the first work of criticism on the topic, but it claims to be the first study in English that reflects upon and relates to the entire field of openings.

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INDEX OF OPENINGS

The following index lists openings that are quoted in this dissertation according to their author and the novel's name: